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"GOOD MARSE DEBBLE," GASPED LEM, DROPPING UPON HIS KNEES, "DOAN' TAKE ME DIS TIME, AN' I'LL NEBBER LIE AG'IN—NEBBER NO MOAH!"

OR,

THE LUCKY LAD'S WINNING HAND.

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"DAINTY LANCE" NOVELS. "MUSTANG
SAM," "HURRICANE BILL," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A STRANGELY-ASSORTED PAIR.

"DRY wood and wet water, with a kitchen as extensive as all out-doors! What more can you ask for, Lemuel?"

"Wha'—wha's de kitchen, boss?"

"You're its central ornament, Lemuel, and though the roof may be a trifle high, the walls reach out to correspond. The floor *might* be a little cleaner, perhaps, but with Jupiter Pluvius

making a colander of those clouds overhead, and you—shall I use you to mop up the earth with, Lemuel Claybank?"

"De good Lawd!"

"Exactly! Then buckle down to work, else our supper-dishes will get washed before we have time to soil them. What's in the larder, Lem?"

"De lard, boss?"

"You're two-thirds right, and that's a vast improvement over your usual score, Lemuel. Though I view such a prospect with the deepest melancholy, and would gladly give all my old boots could I only coax, trick or scare you into consenting to a divorce from my bed, board and society, Claybank, I really believe that with six months more of my training, you would grow actually wise. Not handsome, Lemuel! One has to draw the line somewhere, and—to be continued!"

Breaking off abruptly, Light-heart Lute sprung forward to examine several flat stones lying at no great distance, the arrangement of which had caught his keen glance.

The smoke-blackened edges, and the layer of soft ashes within, told a story too plain for mistaking; and even as he thrust a hand into the rude fireplace, Luther Larrimer cast a swift, suspicious glance around, like one who more than half-expects to sight unwelcome neighbors.

The ashes were cold, and no trace of heat lingered in the stones, other than the warmth borrowed from the sun itself. No rain had fallen in that region for days back, and Light-heart Lute knew that the owner of the hands by which that fireplace had been constructed, might be many a long league away at that moment.

"Here's your range, Lemuel!" he called out, cheerily, rising erect. "There's no sign out, so we'll call it an abandoned claim, and jump it accordingly. Skin your small deer, while I turn wood-gatherer for the nonce!"

It was growing dusky, the gathering storm cutting the twilight even shorter than usual. Light-heart Lute could "rough it" with the best, when occasion demanded, but, in addition to being particularly hungry that evening, he was civilized enough to prefer a comfortable meal to an uncomfortable one.

He fell to work, collecting material for the fire, unheeding if he saw the dubious glance which Lemuel Claybank cast in that direction, ever and anon.

"Wha's dey any *deah*, small or t'udderwise?" the colored gentleman mumbled, as he unfastened the furry trophies from his belt. "Is *dat* a *deah*?" giving a loving pat to a gaunt "ole bar" before gently laying it across a handy rock. "Is *dem* 'small *deahs*?' giving a lofty sniff of contempt as he viewed a brace of gray squirrels. "Wha's dey ho'ns? Wha's dey—Yaas, boss! I'm gittin' dah, mighty quick!"

"That's all right, Lemuel, but don't hurry too mighty fast, or your heart may go back on you, again. And that would be terrible—coming before supper, too!"

"He's crazy—jest plum' luny! Dat's what *he* is, now, fo' suah!" muttered Lem, with a half-snort, half-sigh. "Pokin' fun at a poah debble 'long o' his 'farmities! Doan' I know what I do know? An' ef I *hain't* got de heart disease, wha' fo' all dat wind come belchin' up my froat whenebber I bin eat a hyarty meal? Eh? You? Dat's what I want to know!"

Smothered indignation did not hamper Lemuel's hands, and by the time Light-heart Lute had built up a generous pile of dry fagots, the squirrels and rabbits were ready for cooking.

"Cut them up for a quick roast, Lem, old boy!" nodded Lute, busying himself over a handy knapsack arrangement which, of late, had been generously transferred from his own shoulders to those of his recently acquired comrade. "No time for artistic touches, if we want supper over long enough before the rain falls to hunt up a hotel."

"Ef I jes' had some ob dat lard you was talkin' 'bout, boss!"

"Why didn't you send word you were lost and waiting for my finding, Lemuel? I'd have brought lard, and butter, and a fryingpan, and a coffee-pot, and—Of course I couldn't tote 'em all, but *you*—well, that's different! We'll strike out for civilization in the morning, and if I don't load you down to the gunwales, it'll be because my pocket isn't deep enough, or my credit good at the junk-shop. Lem!"

"Yes, sah!"

"Heads I win, tails you lose! Good enough! I'm not nicknamed the Lad of Luck for naught! It's my first brew, but I'll help you pray the rain off long enough to boil a second quart of

coffee. Give me a corner of the range—so!" deftly placing the dingy tin cup where it would receive the full benefit of the fiercest flames.

If Lem recalled the old story of turkey and buzzard, he said nothing. Although their acquaintance was so recent, he had already learned to take a good many puzzling things for granted.

Then, too, his gratitude was genuine, for he knew that, in all human probability, Light-heart Lute had rescued him from starvation, or a less protracted death under the claws of the mountain wild beasts.

Nearly a month had passed by since Luther Larrimer left the busy little mining-town which had sprung up near the recently heralded "rich strike," and where his former "side pardner" and bosom friend, Poley Applejohn, had settled down with his pretty little bride.

For long years past—though still so young himself—Light-heart Lute had been searching for what he had as yet failed to find: a father, who had vanished from sight and hearing long ago.

Until now, he had never wanted for a genial, tried and true companion. Even now, a single word would have put that honest, faithful chum in harness, but Lute could not say it.

"Nixey, old man! You've got a wife to look after, and I've got my freedom once more!" he said, laughingly. "Makes me feel so mighty good to get shut of your apron-string, Poley, that I'm off for the hills, where I can yelp and howl and kick up my heels to my heart's content! So-long, pard! I'll be back in time to help name the baby!"

It was during his seemingly aimless wanderings on this occasion that Light-heart Lute came across that bewildered, almost despairing wanderer, who still bore signs of the privations which had brought him almost to death's door before that fortunate meeting took place.

He was anything but handsome, now. He had been fairly repulsive, then. In his blind, ignorant fight for life against such heavy odds, the poor fellow had caught something of the wild-beast-like look in his great eyes, his dusky face, his gaunt form.

Still, he was a man and a brother, and Light-heart first filled his stomach before striving to lighten his brain. Then, when the poor fellow began to realize that he had fallen into kindly hands, Larrimer was not long in learning his simple history.

His name was Lemuel Claybank. He had drifted West—mainly by the Empty Freight and Brake-beam Line—with the vague hope of picking up a fortune: gold or silver, he cared little, just so it was enough.

His latest employment was cooking for a party of prospectors, or explorers, but that had come to an abrupt termination.

"Dey jest kicked a bale o' hay outen me, boss, an' so I—I jest up an' 'charged mysef, so I did, now!"

"And, per consequence, I'm charged with your keeping! Lemuel, hold up your feet, please! I begin to believe—fooled again!" with a slow shake of his head and a deepening of that puzzled expression in eyes and on face. No holes there to plug up, and—do you *always* eat as much, Lemuel?"

"When I kin git de whar with, boss!"

"That does settle it! Lem, I'm going to sacrifice myself, and send you on a visit to a very dear friend of mine. Not for good, you know; merely until I can buy, beg, borrow or steal a train of pack-mules numerous enough to tote at least one week's provisions for the pair of us! I hate to do it, Lemuel, for you come in mighty handy packing the camp truck, but—fir-t I know, you'll be picking *my* bones, and calling them 'ole har'!"

Light-heart Lute uttered this decision positively enough, but he found it impossible to shake off this modern "Man o' the Sea," and hence it came about that we find Lemuel still in his company.

On these excursions, Larrimer always traveled lightly laden, preferring to shoot such game as he cared to eat, living very well without bread-stuff so long as his supply of coffee lasted. But Lem had a coffee-tooth, as well, and it was mainly because this all-important article of food was running low, that Light-heart Lute turned his face toward home: the home of Poley Applejohn, for the adventurer knew none other!

Despite the threatening clouds and the low rumblings of distant thunder, the oddly assorted pair seemed to enjoy their rude meal by the dim glow of the camp-fire. Hunger is the keenest of sauces, and roasted game, hot from the spit, is not to be despised.

Light-heart Lute preferred the squirrels, but, true to tradition, Lem felt there was nothing to equal "Molly Cottontail."

"'Ceptin' dey was *two* ob 'em! Or ef 'twas a jack-yabbit! Big as a mule—an' *all mine*!" sighed the hungry African, licking his fingers and then tackling the last quarter of the hare.

"Which would you rather be, Lemuel: a pitcher of base-ball, or a head cook in a hash-foundry where the owner was too proud or too lazy to keep you whistling all the time you were at work?"

"Bofe, boss! All two bofe on 'em!" spluttered Claybank, with an enthusiastic gesture, his great eyes rolling in fine ecstasy at the mere idea. "I'd fan 'em out! Jes' fan 'em *all* out! An' den—Good Lawd! Den I'd be hongry 'nough fer to—*oh, mamma!* Wouldn't I eat? Makes me crawl all ober jest to—*dar she am, ag'in!*" dropping the picked bone and clasping both hands over his stomach, his face turning an ashen gray. "You kin laugh, boss, but ef *dat* doan' mean heart disease, den what's the mattah wid *me*? Eh? You? What's de mattah wid *me*? What makes dat flitter-flutter go? What sets dat ole frog to kickin' up a 'sturbance right yar? Eh?"

"It's Molly Cottontail trying to shake paws with her kindred gone before, Lem," laughed Light-heart Lute, casting a glance upward at the lowering clouds while his nimble fingers were engaged in filling his short-stemmed pipe for an after-supper smoke. "Watch your coffee, old fellow, or it'll—ha!"

A sepulchral groan came through the gloom, and as Larrimer caught up a blazing brand and cast it toward the sound, the ruddy glow for a brief space lighted up a pale, ghastly-looking face, the unearthly eyes in which seemed fixed full upon the frightened negro.

"*De debble!*" gasped Lem, dropping upon his knees with clasped hands extended toward that strange vision. "Good Marse Debbles—boss—doan' take me *dis* time, an' I'll nebber lie ag'in—nebber no moah!"

CHAPTER II.

RESCUED FROM THE GRAVE.

"STEADY, there!" sharply cried Light-heart Lute, one swift leap carrying him beyond the limited circle of light, his right hand gripping a revolver. "I've got you lined, and I'll blow you through at the first crooked move!"

The brand flickered, then the flame died out. That ghastly face was lost to sight, and with the spell partially broken, Lem rolled over and over, then scrambled to his feet and started in head-long flight from—what was it?

He ran plump against Larrimer, who unceremoniously tripped him up, sternly growling:

"Lie still, you fool! Try to run away, and I'll chase you with hot lead! I say—you fellow, over yonder!"

"Help! where am I?"

Hoarse, husky, uncertain the accents, yet plainly those of one in suffering. But Light-heart Lute had passed through too many scenes of peril to take aught for granted, and only pausing long enough to distinctly utter:

"Keep him covered, Lem, and riddle him at the first crooked move!"

Then, with swift, noiseless steps, he glided around far enough to bring that spot between himself and the merrily blazing camp-fire.

He caught sight of a human head feebly lifting—from the very earth, as it seemed! And though he strained his eyes to the utmost, he failed to detect aught of a body to correspond!

"Don't—Grace, my—"

The head sunk back, with a husky moan such as no well man could counterfeit, and after another keen glance around, Light-heart Lute sprung forward to find—

A shallow grave and its occupant, who certainly had been living when interred, whatever might be his condition just now.

Deathlike enough he looked now, with his face so ghastly pale despite the dirt and blood-marks visible by that indistinct light.

"Marse Lute! O-h-h, boss!" came the quavering cry from the darkness which enveloped the negro.

"Button up! Lay low—and watch!" sharply cried Larrimer, then swiftly altering his position.

Although he felt reasonably sure that no other person could be lurking nigh, Light-heart Lute was taking no wild chances. Living or dead, this buried stranger could better afford to wait a few minutes longer without the help he had asked, than they to blindly risk sharing the same fate which had overtaken him.

With this thought uppermost, Lute quickly took a scout around, making sure no enemy was

skulking near. Then he returned to that ineffectual grave, bending low and gazing keenly into that ghastly face.

"Not dead—thank the Lord!" he breathed, softly, recognizing a swoon. "Foul play—for dead sure!"

Though the light was so dim, just there, he could see enough to explain at least a part of what had puzzled him. This unfortunate stranger had been buried so hastily or so carelessly, that while hidden from their sight while passing near in gathering fuel, he had been able to force the dirt, leaves and sticks from over his face, the growling thunder smothering such sounds as he made while so doing.

Satisfied that life still lingered in that form, Lute quickly set about rallying Lemuel, whose aid he knew would be essential. He found this a work of time, for the poor fellow was half scared to death; but at heart Lem was a true lad, and when his natural dread of "spooks" had been overcome, he fell to work with a hearty good will.

Together they disinterred the stranger, the pity of each growing as they noted those marks of brutal violence: the gashed scalp, the perforated chest, all telling of murder, attempted if not perfected.

Bearing the body closer to the camp-fire, Light-heart Lute bade Lem search among the shelving rocks hard by for a spot where they might be sheltered from the coming storm, then set about examining the body more carefully.

The stranger was past middle age, judging from his gray hair and almost white beard. His hands bore signs of hard work, and his clothes were such as a miner or prospector would naturally wear; coarse, stout, of material fitted for roughing it.

There was nothing in any of his pockets to identify him; no money, no writing; and though Light-heart Lute knew, from the signs of wear on his trowsers, that he had recently worn a belt of arms, that also was missing.

The lacerated scalp told of a cruel blow, or blows, but gentle manipulation with his fingertips assured Lute that the fracture, if any, could be of no great extent.

It was different when he came to examine that broad chest, carefully cutting the blood-stiffened cloth until the hurts were revealed. These were two in number; small, livid spots, now closed, but telling only too plainly that the assassin had fired twice.

"He must have the constitution of an ox, to have lived so long!" the adventurer reflected, frowning darkly as he flashed an involuntary glance around them. "If he pulls through—but he can't! The day of miracle working are past and gone!"

"I done 'skivered it, boss!" cried Lemuel, at this juncture.

"Discovered what—whom—which?"

"Hole in de wall, boss! Jes' like 'twas made fo' us-all, an'—huh!" with a goose-like cocking of his eye toward the clouds as the patter of heavy rain-drops began. "Dah she comes, boss! Yainin', fo' suah! Mighty wet, too!" as a big drop struck one of those wildly rolling eyeballs.

"Catch hold—gently, you rascal!" said Larrimer. "Lead the way to this hole of yours, and—stumble if you dare, sir!"

Between them they carried the unconscious stranger a few rods from the camp-fire, along the shelving ledge of rocks of which mention has been made, and when Lem nodded toward the cave he had discovered, Lute caused their burden to be lowered until he could investigate for himself.

The entrance was both low and narrow, and his nostrils were greeted with anything but an agreeable odor when he crept inside; but the match which he struck showed him that the den was spacious enough for them all, and would at least afford perfect shelter from the increasing storm.

Backing out, he resumed his burden, and the unconscious stranger was quickly under cover.

"Run out and fetch in the rest of the wood, Lem," hastily muttered Lute, at the same time striking another match and by its faint light quickly raking together a quantity of leaves which had drifted into the hole.

He gave a little start as his fingers closed over a cold bone, but there was nothing superstitious about it; he knew now what he had suspected when that rank, disagreeable odor came to his nostrils.

"A wild beast's den! All right; we're here first!" he muttered to himself, casting the bone aside and turning to relieve Lem of his first armful of wood. "Bring more; we'll need light to see by, if we're to do this poor fellow any good."

"Den—he hain't done dead, boss?" faltered Lemuel.

"Don't you think it, old fellow! Bring wood, before it gets soaked, and I'll look after the rest."

With the dry leaves as a starter, Lute found it an easy task to get a small but cheery fire to burning, and by its clear light he did all that lay in his power to aid the luckless stranger.

Before trying to restore his senses, Light-heart neatly bandaged those ugly wounds in his chest, to lessen the liability of hemorrhage should the patient recover sufficiently to talk. One bullet had passed entirely through the body, but the other had stopped inside.

"So much the worse for your chances, stranger!" muttered Larrimer, when this point was ascertained. "I wouldn't dare go hunting for it, even if I had the proper instruments!"

Having Lem fill the coffee-cup with cool water from the spring, Light-heart Lute produced a half-pint flask of good brandy, and mixed a fairly strong draught in his pocket-cup.

Drop by drop at first, then in gradually increasing portions, he succeeded in getting this mixture down the throat of the wounded man, to be shortly after rewarded by a gasp, a sigh, a frightened start, and a moment later an opening of those hollow, sunken eyes!

"Easy, pardner!" soothingly murmured the adventurer. "We're your best friends, just now, and we'll pull you safely through if you'll just lay quiet and let us do all the work. Understand?"

"I say, boss!" croaked Lem, his great eyes glowing whitely from out the gloom into which he had retreated. "Dar's de heapin'est pile ob ole bones ober heah, dat ebber you—"

"Eat 'em, if you like. Take 'em outside with you—go watch against any one's running off with our fire. Come back when I call you; not before—understand?"

Lem grumbled, but obeyed, as he always did when Light-heart Lute assumed that stern manner. He never suspected the truth that Larrimer hoped to keep from him the fact that they had sought refuge in the den of a wild beast!

True, it might not have been occupied for many months; he had had no time to decide that point by a closer examination; but if he was to coax this almost corpse back to life, all excitement must be avoided.

Pleased with the result, so far, Larrimer strengthened the dose of grog, coaxing the wounded man to drink, much as he might have coaxed a fretful child. And, little by little his strength seemed to return to him, though that wild, haunted, dazed look never once left his eyes.

Touching lightly on that point at first, watching closely the effect of his words, Light-heart Lute at length contrived to make his patient realize how they had found him partially resurrected from an untimely grave by his own hands!

"I know—I was smothering!" the stranger gasped, shivering like one who still experiences that awful agony of both mind and body. "He didn't kill me—though he—tried!"

Although naturally eager to hear the whole truth of what he knew must be a strange, thrilling story, Larrimer held his curiosity in check for a time longer, giving his patient frequent sips of nearly pure brandy, a practiced finger keeping tally of his strengthening pulse.

"Don't try to talk too soon, pardner," he would say, cheerfully. "Of course we'll pull you through all right, but it'll come all the lighter if you don't stop to dig in your toe-nails too often! You're worth a thousand dead men, already!"

"I never knew—no warning!" moaned the poor fellow, flinching at each gasp, as though his hurts were being freshly probed. "And my poor little girl—Grace—dear child!"

"She's coming—she'll be here soon to help nurse you back to health and strength again, pardner—never worry!" murmured Lute.

"Coming—where?" cried the stranger, lifting his head and shoulders with a spasmodic effort; only to drop back again, with a moan of anguish which surely was not all bodily. "She can't—she don't know where—O-h-h!"

"She can—she shall come, dear man, if you'll only direct me how and where to find her," distinctly uttered Larrimer, leaning over until their eyes could squarely meet.

A brief silence, during which those sunken eyes seemed trying to read the whole truth. Then he strove once more to rise, unaided. In vain. He felt his impotence, and groaned aloud in acute anguish.

"Can I—trust you?" he huskily gasped, renewing that gaze, only to close his lids with another shiver of bitter pain. "I must!"

"Yes, you must," slowly repeated Larrimer, very gravely. "I swear to be true to whatever trust you may place in me, but—you must speak now—if at all!"

"Then—tell me the whole truth! I am dying?"

"I fear you are, poor fellow!" was the husky response.

CHAPTER III.

LIGHT-HEART LUTE'S LEGACY.

ALTHOUGH he surely must have anticipated such an answer, the wounded man flinched visibly before those gravely reluctant words.

"I hate to say it, pardner, but in a time like this, anything short of the truth would be a curse, rather than a blessing," added Larrimer, too brave and true-hearted himself not to feel strongly agitated. "I'll do my level best, of course, but—well, I'm sadly afraid it's your last sickness, and if you have any word to leave—"

"My poor little girl!" huskily muttered the stranger.

"I'll do my best to soften the blow to her, stranger. Just tell me how and where to find her. For—What is it, old fellow?"

Those closed lids flew open. Those sunken eyes seemed to catch a brighter, keener light from the ruddy glow of the fire. An unsteady hand lifted far enough to touch an arm, and Light-heart Lute drew a bit closer as he asked that question.

"Let me—your eyes!"

"They're honest, if I do say it myself," with a faint smile, bending nearer as he divined what was wanted. "Still, it's for you to decide. If there was any other person near enough to trust, I'd gladly step aside in their favor, but—what's done at all, ought to be done quickly, dear man!"

It was not easy to say just what impression was made upon the injured man by that gaze or those warning words. His heavy lids closed and his feeble fingers dropped away. He seemed sinking into a stupor which might be the forerunner of death.

It seemed cruel to disturb him, since each attempt at speech must cause him pain, but Luther Larrimer dared not lose more time.

The pale, sad face of a little child seemed to flit before his eyes, and he could almost hear a faint voice reproaching him for criminal neglect.

"For her sake," he said, slipping a hand under the wounded man's head, gently raising him a few inches. "For little Grace, brace up!"

"Grace—all alone—all alone, now!"

"You have friends or relatives, surely?"

"None—all alone!" groaned the stranger, shivering, closing his lips and trying to avert them from the proffered draught.

"Call it medicine, and take it like a man," almost sternly spoke the adventurer, persisting. "You must tell me how I can find your child, and this will lend you strength. Come—swallow a drop, pardner!"

"I didn't know. I thought—yes, give it—strong!"

Light-heart Lute did not wait to be asked twice. Believing as he did that the end was nigh, and that the poor fellow was beyond being injured by anything he could administer, he brought the flask into play, and permitted his patient to swallow what he could.

That was not much, from a well man's standpoint, but the spirits produced an almost magical effect on that weakened frame. A clearer light came into his eyes. A tinge of color showed in his face. His voice grew stronger and the words came with less pain.

"I thank you, sir! I will—help me fight back death until—I can trust you to do right?"

The old haunting doubts came back again, bearing witness to a troubled past. Surely, enemies must have been more plentiful than friends, in this poor fellow's experience!

"I'll do my level best, sir," earnestly replied Lute. "While I lay no claim to being better than the average, I'm white and free born. I had a mother—once—and I'd be ashamed to lie and think of her, as I do of nights, at spells, if I thought anything could make me go back on my word when once given to a dying man."

"Forgive—I didn't mean—"

"All right, pardner!" as he gently pressed that cold, nerveless hand once more. "Now tell me your name, and where I can find your home. I'm asking it for her sake, remember!"

With his eyes the injured man asked for the brandy flask, and after swallowing a few more drops of the powerful stimulant, he gave the desired information.

Even yet it seemed difficult for him to speak, and the sentences were broken, at times too disconnected for any one less deeply interested than

Light-heart Lute had grown, to follow without losing his real meaning.

He gave his name as Adam Elton, and his place of residence as being on or near the left bank of the little river called Little Roarer. It was a poor little place, such as one man might raise in a few days, but it was *home* to him, for there his darling—his only child, a daughter named Grace—had dwelt with him for nearly two years.

This much the wounded man said, before a spell of weakness caused him to break off for the time being.

Light-heart Lute said little, though his surprise was great enough. He knew that Little Roarer River was not far distant, but he knew, too, that it ran through the wildest part of that country, where even a strong, rugged man would find it a sore trial to live. What, then, must it be for a little girl?

The storm without was increasing in severity, the rain falling in heavy sheets, the thunder crashing, the lightning flashing with blinding brilliancy at short intervals.

Remembering poor Lemuel, Lute stole out of the cave, and waiting for another flash, caught sight of his follower crouching under the shelving rocks, sheltered from the wet, his arms encircling his doubled-up knees, his face buried in the hollow thus formed.

Whether sleeping, or merely hiding from the lightning, Light-heart Lute could only surmise, but content with knowing Lemuel was in comparative comfort, he crept back without hailing him, returning to the side of his patient in hopes of gaining a little more definite information.

This he did, thanks to the stimulating brandy, and to his adroit questioning, though there were many minor points which he was obliged to leave untouched upon, lest the end should come before those more essential were cleared up.

Adam Elton said enough to give a fair idea of what had led him to locate in that wild, desolate region.

Financial misfortunes had driven him toward the setting sun, and when he had found at least a portion of that which had brought him, like so many others, to the mining country, loneliness and paternal love combined to work the rest—he brought his daughter "home."

"She made it home—the only home I've known since her poor mother left us!" sighed Elton, his lids closing once more.

"Poor child, I'd say!" mentally amended Luther; but that was no time for reading a homily on selfishness, and he touched on a different point.

"Who did you up, Elton? How many were in the gang? And what did they hope to gain—dust only?"

"I don't—I'm not sure; but—oh! 'twas cruel!" with a brief outburst of despairing indignation. "He never gave me warning! Never gave me the ghost of a show! Just butchered me—like a dog!"

"Who did it, pardner?" persisted Larrimer. "I'll pay him back in full, if you'll just set me on his track. Who did it?"

"I don't—I never saw—'twas all like a nightmare!"

Elton added other words, but his voice had grown too husky and indistinct for even those keen ears to pick out the meaning. And once more Larrimer forced the injured man to sip a few drops of brandy.

"Try to brace up, pardner, and while you're trying, I'll do the heft of the talking. Now, do you know the man who downed you? Nod if you do, shake if you don't."

A feeble shake of the head came in response. Adam Elton did not know for certain just who had attempted his death.

"Why did he do it? Had you any large amount of money on your person?"

"Some—few hundred. But—the secret—bonanza!"

Light-heart Lute gave a start at those words. A secret bonanza! Did Elton realize what he was saying, or was this but one of those wild, vague fancies which so frequently haunt the last minutes of a man who comes to his death-bed through violence.

"No—I mean it!" said Elton, speaking with greater distinctness than before, rallying once again, thanks to the brandy. "I found it—before bringing Grace. I dared not be away so long—to visit her. And she alone, besides me, knows where—the place is."

Light-heart Lute gave a little shiver at this, for his thoughts flashed away toward the "little child." She knew of this dangerous secret, and—had the murderer or murderers paid her a visit, too?

"God above! you don't think—you can't

think they'll harm my poor child?" gasped Elton, seeming to read that dread fear in the kindly face before him.

"No, no, of course not, dear man!" soothingly assured Larrimer, gently lowering that head. "How could they? If only you and Grace know of the bonanza, how could any other person catch a hint that way?"

"He said—what did I hear him say when—or, was it a dream?"

"A dream, of course, dear sir! Now—"

"I can trust you? You will be true to my little girl?" panted Adam Elton, gripping an arm with feverish force once more.

"I'll be true to her, as Heaven hears me!" was the earnest reply.

Once more those haggard eyes were veiled, and only for the painfully-laboring chest, Larrimer might have fancied death had claimed its prey. But Elton quickly rallied, speaking with feverish energy:

"There's millions in it, if properly worked, and only her—only my poor little girl to claim it! Only Grace—and you, my friend!"

"All hers, pardner. I ask nothing for the little I may be able to do," quickly interposed the young adventurer.

"No—share even—enough for both!" eagerly panted the injured miner. "Swear to be true—swear to treat her as—your dead mother's child, and—"

"I swear it, pardner," was the grave response. "I swear to treat your daughter as I would my own sister, if she'll accept my services."

"She will—she must! She'll be all alone when—I'm gone! And that devil—kill him, if he dares to try to harm my darling!"

"I'll kill him as I would a hydrophobia cat, if he and I ever meet up with each other, Adam Elton."

"You have sworn—be true to my little girl?"

"I have sworn."

"Then—remember! It's a sacred legacy—a legacy from the grave! My body'll bedust, but in spirit I'll—as ye do unto her, so may Heaven deal with you!"

In his intense emotion, the wounded man had partially raised himself up from the folded blankets, gripping both Larrimer's hands between his own, pressing them spasmodically while pronouncing those words. But now, exhausted by the effort, he fell back, limp and nerveless, more like a corpse than a man who had a long life before him.

Light-heart Lute was pale with strong emotion, for he felt that this could only hasten the end, and though he had vainly striven to hold the dying miner in check, he felt partly responsible for the outcome.

His first fear proved groundless. Adam Elton was not dead, though he looked so corpse-like. And feeling that he must learn more, Luther again called the precious brandy-flask into play.

Elton swallowed feebly, and presently his lids opened. His sunken eyes told that reason remained, and Lute began to question him more closely concerning the exact location of his cabin home; was it further up the river, or was it below that point?

Elton made some reply, but the words were lost amid the thundering which caused the earth to quake for several moments. Then, just as Light-heart Lute was about to repeat his questions, a wild, eldritch screech came from outside, closely followed by the gaunt figure of Lemuel Claybank shooting through the narrow entrance on all-fours, his tones full of terror as he yelled aloud:

"De debble—de debble's comin', boss!"

If not the devil, something else was!

CHAPTER IV.

A LITTLE MORE LIGHT.

SOMETHING more dangerous to honest men than Satan could have proved, too!

As that wild yell rung forth, Light-heart Lute leaped erect and to one side, his hands seeking the belt of arms about his middle, for only too well he knew the meaning of that alarm.

Closely following Lem—so closely, in fact, that its claws gave his hunched-up shoulders an ugly rake in passing—came the long, gaunt shape of a mountain lion, driven to its den by the crashing of thunder and the blinding glare of lightning.

It struck fairly upon the little fire, scattering the glowing sticks as it bounced aside the next instant, arching its back and showing its long teeth in a howl of mingled rage and affright.

Then another strange thing happened.

With a maniacal cry—half-laughter, half-defiance—Adam Elton flung himself upon the fierce brute, grappling its throat with his fin-

gers, fairly overthrowing the lion with the vigor of his onset!

Fortunately the fire had only been scattered, not extinguished, by those paws, and there was light enough to guide hand and weapon as Light-heart Lute leaped forward to the rescue.

Man and beast were locked together, rolling over and over in a death-grapple. It was impossible to use a pistol, and realizing the importance of haste in action, Larrimer flashed forth his long knife, feeling for and clutching the lion by the nape of the neck before sending his steel home.

Only one blow was needed, thank Heaven! With spine divided, and that keen point fairly reaching its heart, the gaunt beast gave one spasmodic shiver, then permitted its assailant to be drawn from its powerless paws without resistance.

"Freshen the fire, you howling idiot!" cried Larrimer, sternly, to the frightened negro.

He feared the worst, for Elton lay limp and nerveless in his friendly grasp, as though his feeble spark of life had gone out in that one mad struggle.

Lem tremblingly obeyed, and quickly had a bright light leaping up from the dry leaves. And by this, Light-heart Lute saw that—as yet—his worst fears had not come true.

Adam Elton was alive, but that was about all one could say. He drew his breath feebly, flutteringly, in irregular gasps. His eyes were half-open, but they seemed already glazing, and nothing of reason or intelligence could be detected therein.

Yet he had suffered but little from the claws of the lion. A few superficial scratches were all Larrimer could discover, and they had not disturbed the bandages over his wound. Yet—surely the poor fellow was dying!

Light-heart Lute turned to the brandy-flask, but Elton made no effort to swallow. The liquor slowly oozed from the corner of his lips.

In awed silence Lem watched his master, shivering at brief intervals, more with terror than with cold. And then, fearing less the wild beasts, the thunder and lightning, the darkness without, than the death within, he crept through the narrow opening and once more cowered close to the friendly rocks which at least sheltered him from the falling rain.

"Wha'—wha' is it, boss?" he quavered, after a time—ages it seemed to the poor fellow—as he caught sight of Light-heart Lute coming toward him from the cave.

"It's all over, poor fellow," gravely spoke the young adventurer, as he squatted down beside the negro. "He went off easy, at the last, and—"

"Kin we go now, boss?" wistfully muttered Lem, shrinking away from that cave. "De rain hain't nigh so wet as it was, an'—an'—"

"Why should we run, Lem? We never harmed the poor fellow in life. We aided him to the best of our poor ability while life lingered. Why should we be frightened of him now?"

"Good Lawd! wha' fo' I ebber come to sech a kentry as dis yer?" moaned the negro, hiding his face on the arms that closely hugged his doubled-up knees, rocking from side to side.

Instead of laughing at or chiding him for his folly, Light-heart Lute spoke gently, kindly, soothingly, doing his best to remove those foolish fears of the harmless dead. And, in course of time, he succeeded in a measure.

Once or twice Larrimer crept into the cave, to freshen the fire, and hoping against hope to again bend over that silent figure. His passing away had been so calm, so peaceful, that it was very hard to believe death had indeed claimed its victim.

And so the gray dawn found them, chilled, pale from watching and from strong emotion, but both with steadier nerves and stouter hearts than had been theirs while that darkness lasted.

The storm had long since ceased, though a number of clouds still lingered. It was clearing away, giving promise of a fair, bright day.

Light-heart Lute left Lem crouching there under the rocks, and entering the den, he brought out the remnant of wood with which he quickly started a fire, out of sight of that narrow entrance. With those dry fagots for a foundation, it was no serious task to build up a cheery pile, and filling his quart cup with water at the spring, Larrimer soon had a dose of strong coffee to offer the negro.

"Aftah you, boss!" huskily mumbled Lem, though his wide nostrils were all aquiver with that welcome scent.

"Drink; and swallow it red-hot, too!" peremptorily spoke the adventurer. "I can't

stand that teeth-rattling any longer! Then, too, I need your help in more ways than one. Drink, I say!"

Lemuel obeyed, though the scalding-hot coffee brought tears streaming down his cheeks. But it was just the stimulant required, and when Light-heart Lute topped it off with a fair swallow of brandy, the son of Africa was fairly himself once more, despite that object of superstitious dread lying in the wild beast den so near at hand.

"Now, old fellow, hustle about and dish up what there's left, for breakfast. Little enough, worse luck! but we'll make it answer until something more substantial offers. And—Lem!"

"Right heah, boss!"

"Call me when you're ready. I'm going in yonder to—Well, I'll hear you if you call loud enough."

Without waiting for an answer, Light-heart Lute entered the den, shortly appearing again, dragging the carcass of the mountain lion after him, leaving it at the edge of a clump of bushes some distance from the entrance, then retracing his steps.

The fire had died out, but enough light came through the opening to assure him that no changes had taken place since his last visit to the unfortunate miner, who had so strangely been thrown into their company.

He lay as he had been left, on the folded blankets, his hands resting upon his bullet-pierced bosom, his lids closed, his face calm and composed. The gloom hid those ugly blood-stains, and no one seeing him thus, could have dreamed that Adam Elton had come to his death through such bitter agony.

Light-heart Lute knelt beside the body, lowering his head until one ear gently touched the clothing over that heart. No sound—not the faintest flutter, as there surely would be if life lingered.

"Poor fellow!" huskily murmured Larrimer, lifting his head and gazing almost wistfully into that pale face. "Your earthly troubles are over, but—mine are just beginning. I'd give a hand, almost, not to have been your confidant, but—I took the oath, I accepted your sacred legacy. And—Heaven helping me! I'll keep that vow!"

He rose to his feet and left the cave, just as Lem called out that grub was ready. And together they ate the scanty meal in silence.

When the last of the coffee was swallowed, Light-heart Lute nodded to Lem, leading the way to the cave entrance, a blazing brand in his hand. Reluctantly he won Lemuel to gaze upon that pale face by the ruddy light, saying:

"Steady, boy! See if you can't place him, Lem. Did you ever see him before last night? Slowly—take your time!"

"I fink—fo' suah, boss!" huskily ejaculated the negro.

"All right; it just struck me that it might be so," nodded Larrimer, as he turned away to leave the den. "Come outside, boy. There's a bit of work to be done before we do any talking."

Lemuel gave a shiver as he thought of handling that corpse, but his spirits quickly rallied when he found out what Light-heart Lute really intended doing; not digging a grave, but walling the body up in the den itself.

This was quickly accomplished, though so thoroughly done. Countless stones had dropped from that rocky shelf, some of them large enough to baffle even a mountain lion to roll aside when properly backed up by other rocks. And so, after half an hour's work, the job was finished.

"Now we'll have a smoke, old boy," nodded Light-heart Lute, with more of his wonted jollity than he had shown since that strange resurrection had taken place. "And then you can tell me when, where, and how you first met our poor friend in yonder."

That was briefly told, for Lem was only too anxious to get away from that vicinity.

He said that he had stumbled upon a lone cabin near the river a couple of days before Light-heart Lute met him.

"Dar war jes' de man, fur's I see'd," he added, between puffs. "He 'peared mighty ugly, like he finked I was dah fo' no good, 'stead ob bein' hongry clean frough an' frough! He frowed me a hunk o' bread, an' 'lowed I'd lib heap sight longer ef I skun out o' dar in a holy hurry!"

"You are sure it was the same man?"

"Suah, fo' sart'in, boss!" declared Lemuel.

"And you didn't catch sight of any other person about the house? Nothing of a little girl, for instance?"

"Shool was dar one, boss!"

"That's what I'm asking you: Was there any such about?"

Not that Lemuel had seen, though it was possible, he admitted. For, scared by the dark frowns and harsh words of the man, and eager to eat his hunk of bread, he had skurried away at a run. And when, later, he tried to find the same place again he failed.

"Den you come 'long, boss, an' I clean fo'got all dem tra—dat pore gemman in dar!" hastily amending his speech.

Light-heart Lute sat in silence for a few minutes, deliberating how far to trust this fellow; but then, feeling the need of some one to talk freely to, even if he could offer little help and less consolation, he told Lemuel pretty much all he had gathered from Adam Elton before his passing away.

"I didn't learn near all I wanted to—not nearly all I ought to have found out," he added, staring thoughtfully into the fire. "I would have learned more, only for the coming of that infernal beast!"

"I couldn't help it, boss; 'deed an' double 'deed I jes' couldn't!"

"I'm not blaming you, old fellow. I know you couldn't. Only—But what's done can't be undone, and we'll make the best of it as we go along. So—Lem?"

"Hyar I is, boss!"

"We're going to look up that little girl, first thing. I'd give a finger if I could shirk the job, but it's got to be done! Can you find that cabin, think?"

Lemuel hesitated. He seriously doubted his ability, but with that steady gaze upon his face he feared to hint as much.

"Ef 'tain't clean runned off, boss, why—"

"Because it's got to be found, as the starting-point, and if you can't find it I'll have to. Lemuel?"

"Boss?"

"I never knew a man to die of heart-disease after being skinned alive from top to toe! You'll never prove the exception. So—prove yourself trustworthy in this ugly job, and I'll make a man of you. On the other side, if you play the fool, I'll kill you by inches! Now you know what to expect, we'll pick up our feet and travel!"

CHAPTER V.

DISAGREEABLE GUESTS.

"FOR pity sake, Grace—don't! You make me nervous as a stray cat, with your constant fidgeting!"

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Shaw, but—"

Grace Elton left the apology incomplete, apparently forgetting what her lips had started to utter, so great was her growing anxiety.

Why did he not come? What could be keeping him so much longer than usual? Could anything—

"Guard and protect him, kind Heaven! Bring him back in safety to his little girl, for—he's all I have to live for, now!"

She did not utter the words aloud. She would not let them take perfect shape even in her mind, for that would be admitting the possibility of what she feared so intensely even while fighting against the bare idea: that some evil had overtaken her dearly beloved father, Adam Elton. Yet, for all that, just such a plea was rising from her aching heart as Grace Elton stood by the open window, gazing blindly out across the bleak, rugged landscape before her.

A landscape for the most part composed of bare rocks, naked peaks, gullies and gulches, with here and there a stunted tree or clump of mountain shrubbery, with yonder a patch of fertile ground where the grass grew green and fresh after the recent storm.

Deep down in its water-worn channel rolled Little Roarer, swollen by the rains until it more nearly merited the title of river, even though it did less credit to the name it had won by brawling over and among the rocks and boulders which ages had caused to drop away from those high, rugged banks.

A wild and rugged landscape, truly! And yet—it might have been more cheerless.

True, the cabin was composed mainly of irregular stones, chinked and plastered with "mud-mortar." But one could easily forget this in looking at and admiring the ivy and vines which covered walls and roof, and even twined around the huge, wide-mouthed stone chimney at one end of the cabin.

Over the building leaned the one unstunted, shapely tree of that vicinity. To the rear spread a fairly luxuriant kitchen-garden. On one side lay the spring, grass growing along the little stream by which all superfluous waters found

a way to Little Roarer. On the other, and in neat beds shaped before the cabin, homely flowers were blooming with a freedom that betokened loving and intelligent care.

Grace Elton saw nothing of all this. She had thoughts only for her absent parent, and as a distinct, moving figure caught her eyes, her breath came quickly. Only to be followed by a sigh of disappointment as she recognized, not her anxiously expected parent, but the husband of the woman on whom she had unconsciously turned her back but a few moments earlier.

Huck Shaw announced his coming by a husky yet sonorous clearing of his throat, and the tall woman sprang to the open door with the greeting:

"Anything new, Shaw?"

"Not a dug-gun thing—the way you mean, Roxy!"

"Did you look down the river trail, Mr. Shaw?" asked Grace, turning from the window toward her guests, for whom she felt such an uncomfortable dislike.

Man and wife interchanged glances before Huck Shaw attempted to answer this simple question. The woman nodded, her red lips compressing and her black, arched brows contracting a trifle.

"Waal, I did look, but I knowed aforehand I wouldn't see what you're hopin' fer, Grace."

"I hardly—please explain your meaning, Mr. Shaw!" exclaimed the maiden, frowning a little at that uninvited familiarity. "I am expecting Mr. Elton, and he always comes along that trail. So—"

"It's about time we were laying pity aside in favor of business, Shaw!" coldly interposed the tall woman, nodding her head sharply. "Show Miss Elton the bill of sale, and let's get it over with!"

"The showin's easy 'nough," grinned the fellow, drawing a folded slip of paper from his pocketbook, opening it and fluttering it before those startled eyes. "It's the gittin' over part as worries me!"

"I don't—what does this mean, sir?"

"It means that we've been doing considerable lying on your account, Grace Elton," quickly interposed Mrs. Shaw. "It means that you're looking at a bill of sale, signed by Adam Elton, making over this house and all his claims to land here or hereabouts, to H. Shaw and wife, for value received!"

That one bewildered glance had shown the maiden as much, though she really understood but one point: that the bold signature of her father was appended to that slip of paper.

"An' when you come to count it all up, it's a mighty more value he received them we got back ag'in!" harshly laughed Shaw, drawing the slip back from the unsteady fingers which made a move to take it. "An' that's why I say: look all ye like, but tetch mighty light! Sure, it shows how Huck Shaw was sucked in fer the fu'st time in his life, but that's no reason why I'd ought to let ye 'stroy all I've got to show fer the years o' hard work an'—"

"Rest your chin a bit, Shaw," interposed his wife, dropping the fairly ladylike mask which she had worn up to that hour. "And you, my dear," with a curt nod toward the bewildered girl, "are old enough to learn that all is not gold that glitters? Your father—are you dead sure Adam Elton is your father, by the way?"

"What do you mean, madam?"

"That's better," laughing a bit as Grace flashed up. "I like nerve in a girl, and you'll have use for all you can muster."

"What do you mean, I ask once more?"

"Just what my question implied. If the fellow who calls himself Adam Elton is—"

"Stop! You are speaking of my father, and though you have claimed the rights even a savage shows a guest, there is—"

"Don't forget that we are beneath our own roof-tree, Grace," maliciously laughed Mrs. Shaw. "You are the guest, or that bill of sale tells a lie!"

"It surely does!" flashed the maiden, her face flushed, her great eyes all aglow. "Father would never have taken such a step without first consulting me. Even then—what evil scheme are you trying to work? You have lied—you admitted as much, just now—have you still blacker crimes upon your souls?"

"Oh, come off the perch!" sneered the woman counterfeiting a yawn. "You make me too tired for any sort of use!"

"Yonder is the door; shall I show you the way outside?"

"Dip lightly, Roxy!" warningly muttered Shaw. "No use in kickin' up a bigger dust then we hev to—see!"

"No use in swearing sour milk is sweet cream, now she's taken the first taste! And—you want the whole truth, Grace—call it Elton, if that pleases you most! And I want to give it to you, if only to pay off the score you've been piling up ever since we came here!"

"Because I felt, instinctively, that you were false—false to the very core!" impulsively cried the maiden, facing the virago undauntedly. "I could not deny that you knew my father, since you claimed as much; but I felt you were lying when you said you were his friends. Because my father is a gentleman!"

Those words stung sharply, as that deepening flush declared, and as though conscious that the tempest must fairly spend itself, Huck Shaw slouched across to the door, leaning lazily against one side of the casing, glancing from face to face under his shaggy brows.

"A gentleman, eh?" shrilly cried Mrs. Shaw, her arms akimbo. "Yes! Adam Elton is a gentleman—if to be a gambler, a cheat, a liar, a drunken fraud and slimy-tongued seducer, is a gentleman!"

Grace Elton turned pale as a corpse as she listened to that swift tirade. When the last word was uttered, she sprung forward and back, both movements taking barely a single second. Yet that brief space was long enough for her small, brown hand to sharply smite those red lips!

"Stiddy, Roxy!" cried Shaw, fairly frightened, starting forward like one who dreads a tragedy; but the virago waved him back, laughing shrill and mockingly before saying:

"Don't be a bigger fool than the girl, Huck Shaw! I'll pay her off, but not after your fashion: my blows will cut, not bruise!"

"You have gone too far, Mrs. Shaw," coldly uttered Grace Elton, one hand pointed toward the door. "Go! leave this house, and never—"

"When I get a good ready, which will not be before I've ovensed up with the silly idiot who calls herself the daughter of Adam Elton," was the sneering response. "You surely could not have understood the full meaning of that bit of paper, Miss Elton?"

"It shows a lie on its face, just as your face now proves my first instinct correct. As you asked shelter in my father's name, I could hardly refuse it; now, in his name, I bid you begone!"

"You said that before, and idle repetition is hardly a mark of good sense, leaving good taste entirely out of the question."

For a few moments there was silence between them. Grace stood with her trim, rounded, maidenly figure drawn proudly erect, her beautiful face very pale, but showing no sign of personal fear. She knew that she was physically unable to enforce that command against this tall, powerful woman, leaving aside the burly man with the bull-dog face. She disliked yielding, even in part, but those walls could no longer contain both her enemies and herself.

"Will you oblige me by taking your departure, madam?"

"From my own house?" replied the other.

"You utter a falsehood when you say that, but I'll not lower myself to your degraded level. Since you refuse to go, I'll leave you for—"

"On guard, Huck Shaw!" sharply cried the woman, as Grace turned toward the door.

"I'm right hyar, Roxy. An' you, little gal, don't run clean over me, please!" chuckled Shaw, squaring his burly form and fairly filling the doorway.

"How dare you, sir?"

"Because I say so!" laughed the woman, placing herself in front of the door leading into the other room, used by Grace as a bed-chamber. "Because we've both got a big debt against Adam Elton, and since he declines to show up, we've got to do the next best thing: pay it off on your slim shoulders, my beauty!"

"Take care!" warningly spoke the maiden, retreating a little, but still showing a brave front. "It's true, I'm only a girl, but I know how to defend myself against insult and outrage."

"Is the simple truth an insult?" sneered Mrs. Shaw, plainly enjoying her triumph, pitiful though that must have seemed to a true woman. "If so, square your shoulders, for I'm going to pelt you without end!"

"You flung out because I asked if Adam Elton—so-called—was really your father. Instead, you ought to have thanked me for doubting such a dirty scoundrel as he has proved himself could be father to a perfect lady, such as you have shown yourself!"

"You shall pay for every word that passes your lips, madam! When father comes home—"

"Meaning to this lovely palace?" sneered Mrs.

Shaw. "Bah! you poor fool! He'll never come back here, for—"

"You have not dared—what have you done to my poor father?"

"What has he done to us, rather!" flashed the woman, hotly. "What has he done to my poor sister? What has he—stop, girl!" abruptly breaking off, as Grace turned toward the door.

"Bar the way, Shaw!"

"It's done barred, Roxy!" grinned the bull-dog ruffian.

"Out of the way, sir!" panted Grace, almost suffocating with rage. "Give way, I command you!"

"You command!" shrilly laughed Mrs. Shaw, her handsome face—it was handsome, though too masculine in strength and feature to be termed beautiful—showing both scorn and pity for the moment. "What right have you to command? Instead of being mistress here, you are a slave! A slave—bought and paid for!"

CHAPTER VI.

DRIVEN TO DESPERATION.

DESPITE her native courage—and Grace Elton was a true daughter of a brave man in that respect—the maiden shrunk toward the wall furthest from her newly declared enemies, a strange chill of dread attacking her as she looked into that glowing face.

"I mean just that," nodded Mrs. Shaw, as she called herself for the occasion. "You are a slave, duly bought and fully paid for. Ay!" with a sudden access of bitterness in her tones. "paid for at a figure ten thousand times above your real worth, at that!"

"Tetch lightly, Roxy Ann!" warningly rumbled the man with the bull-dog face. "No need to rub it in too mighty deep!"

"You button up!" flashed the woman, with an angry glance in that direction. "I'm running this outfit, please bear in mind."

"An' I ain't doin' the kickin', Roxy, jest so you don't run it clean into the ground—ye mind that?" growled her fitting mate.

It was only another instance of how prone a drowning person will catch at a straw, but Grace Elton turned toward the sulky brute, holding out her hands appealingly as she faltered:

"Oh, sir, you are a man, and—tell me—no harm has come to my dear father?"

"No wuss harm then he's brung onto himself," was the gruff response, his bloodshot eyes flashing a brief glance into her pale, appealing countenance, then sinking to the floor. "Go on, Roxy Ann! Git it over with, kain't ye?"

"I'll do the talking, if Miss Grace will do the listening, be sure," laughed the woman, lightly.

"I wish to hear no more, madam!"

"Then you'll need something better than your dainty finger-tips to plug up your ears with, my angel!" sneered Mrs. Shaw. "Now I've fairly struck a trot, I'm bound to keep on until under the wire—a winner, you mind! A winner, even though I've lost far more than a host of your class could ever repay!" she added, with an abrupt change of tone.

"You haven't forgotten what we told you on our arrival, two days ago, but nevertheless I'm going to recall a part of that. We told you we were old friends of your father's. That was only partly a lie. We would have hit the mark had we said old acquaintances, instead, for we never were friends with Adam Elton."

"We did know him: had known him for nearly two years. He never came to town without calling at our place, partly because it was the place of all others where he could make or break the most speedily. In still plainer words, he came to our place to gamble!"

"And you expect me to believe the base calumnies you have poured forth against him—a true-hearted, honorable gentleman?" slowly asked the maiden, twin spots of color coming back to her cheeks, her eyes shining brightly. "You—a pair of self-admitted gamblers?"

"With Adam Elton desperately striving to climb high enough to be entered in the same class: don't forget to add that, my dear," sneered her immediate adversary. "It is the naked truth. We kept a gambling-hell, and your father—if he really is your father!—was one of our regular patrons."

"You are lying when you make that charge."

"You are lying when you deny the truth, though I'll give you the poor credit of believing what you say, my angel," bowed her enemy, clearly enjoying this battle of tongues. "And when I've run this deal out to its end, you'll be forced to admit as much!"

"As I started to say, we ran a gambling-room, and whenever your father came to town—for supplies, or to bank his gold, as you no

doubt believed, poor innocent!—he was the first man inside, the last man to leave the table before the lights were turned out."

"I'll give him what little credit is his due; he was a bold, reckless player, and never hung back while he had a stake left to his hand. And at first, he was willing to quit when his supplies ran short."

"Later on, he broke this rule, and would ask for credit, or an advance. We generally gave it. Why not? He had poured many an ounce of clean dust into our coffers, and we knew that he was too true a gambler ever to make a sneak while he had a stake left about his clothes!"

"That is how we summed him up, after the first few visits. And, at that time, the estimate was a true one. But then—well, the wisest of us will make mistakes, and we were not the rare exception, as I'll soon prove to you, my girl!"

"We never knew where Adam Elton held forth when at home; indeed, we never knew that he had a home, at first! Least of all did we suspect that he had a child of your age and dimensions. If we had—but, as I said before, we all run up against a cold deck, at least once in the long game!"

"You are growing wearisome, with all the rest of your sins, Mrs. Shaw," coldly interposed Grace, moving toward a chair nearer the inner room. "Since you force me to listen, at least permit me to sit down."

The human bull-dog at the front door gave a soft chuckle at this, and only for the angry flush that leaped into the face of his ally, he might have betrayed his appreciation still more positively.

"You are wise in time, my angel," forcing herself to speak with a sweetness hardly suited to the occasion. "I'm coming to a point in the deal where you'll require some such support."

"Enforced listening does not imply belief, Mrs. Shaw."

"But truth is mighty, and will prevail! Which is a platitude to match the one you present, my child," sneered Mrs. Shaw. "And now—to business!"

"When I said that Adam Elton was a bold, reckless player, it was the same thing as telling you he nearly always rose a loser. So he did. And even at the very hour when he was planning a foul play, we were pitying him because of his streak of bad luck!"

"I believe I alluded to a sister, some few minutes ago, but now I've got to speak of her more at length, though—bah!" flinging out one hand and restlessly pacing back and forth, though still keeping near enough to the inner door to frustrate any attempt which Grace might make to escape into the chamber. "What's done is done, and I'm a weak fool for stammering over—out with it, then!"

Turning to face Grace, her own countenance showing strong excitement, the woman spoke rapidly:

"Yes, I had a sister; younger than I am, and much more innocent, as the goody-good world judges. I never permitted her to enter the room where cards ruled. I kept her in almost complete seclusion, guarding her against all of our wild associates as one guards the apple of one's eye! Yet—I let down the bars in favor of—Adam Elton!"

"Beware, woman!" sternly cried Grace, her hand rising in menace. "You shall answer for every word you utter now—I give you fair warning!"

"Thank you for nothing, Miss Grace!" bowed the woman, mockingly. "I have only the simple truth to speak, and even your saintly gentleman of a father could hardly object to that! Of course he could do nothing which he would fear having all the world know—including his angel of a daughter!"

"As I said, I let the bars down, once. We believed Adam Elton was a bachelor. I am under the impression that he told us as much in plain words. Am I wrong, Mr. Shaw?"

"He said it—sure!"

"One liar backing up another!" sneered the maiden.

"We are in good company, my angel," laughed the woman, recklessly, then adding, rapidly: "And under that belief, really pitying the luckless fellow who was pouring a yellow flood across the painted cloth into our coffers, I gave Adam Elton an introduction to my sister."

"Possibly you can guess the rest, but I prefer telling it after my own fashion. When weary of playing—and we both noticed that Adam Elton would occasionally leave the table before losing his last dollar, contrary to his previous habit—this honorable gentleman would call at our private rooms, to see—my sister!"

"Doubtless you remember the last time he left here to go to town? So do we, though, at the time, we little suspected that he was paying his last visit to our table!

"He bet freely, as he always did, but that was nothing odd, for, as I said before, Adam Elton played recklessly. But we noted another thing, which was contrary to his usual custom, his heavy drinking!

"I gave him a hint—even I had no right to do more—but it produced no effect. If anything, he drank all the harder, and when his dust played out, he asked for loan after loan, until his heavy betting finally won the lay-out to his lonesome self, all other players preferring to look on and enjoy the sport. Then—but why draw it out any longer?

"We won everything, then tried to close the game, but he begged for just one more deal. He swore that he had a valuable home—this wretched place, forsooth! He vowed that he owned a bonanza worth millions if properly worked, and—well, we dealt again! Simply to soothe the poor fellow, you understand! We took that bill of sale, which you will see covers both this home and his secret bonanza. We had no idea of keeping it, partly because neither of us believed his wild romances, but mainly because we really pitied the poor fellow! Think of it, will you?" with a short, hard laugh. "Actually pitied him, while, all the time, he was planning to elope with my young sister—and still more!"

"Do you really expect me to believe all this bosh?" scornfully interposed Grace Elton.

"You can't help it, when I show you the damning proofs!" was the fierce reply, one hand slipping into her bosom, coming forth with a folded piece of paper. "We found this in my sister's chamber, the next morning—but my sister was gone! And—so was that honorable gentleman, Adam Elton!"

She thrust the paper into that reluctant hand, turning it so Grace could see the signature—that of her absent father, real or admirably counterfeited. And, almost unconsciously, Grace read the lines traced thereon, beginning without date or address:

"When you read this, we will be safely out of reach, and long before you can catch up. Laura will be my wife! She has helped herself to a few of the dollars you won from me—call it even, and bear the loss as best you can, is my last advice.

"You have my home, my bonanza, my little girl—everything! Treat her as near white as you know how, if you hope to live and prosper!

"Tell her to forget and forgive, if she can! I loved her, but—I love Laura a thousand times more dearly! She is my life, my soul, all the world to me from this hour, until death tears us apart!

"When you go to claim your new rights, give the note inclosed to Grace. Tell her that it is the last word she will ever hear or receive from the one who has tried to be a father to her until now.

"ADAM Z. ELTON."

Watching keenly, Mrs. Shaw placed a second bit of paper into the girl's hand the instant her dazed eyes reached that signature.

"This is the note he speaks of. Read it! And while reading, remember that they took with them every dollar we could call our own! Robbed us of our all! Left us beggars—save this miserable hut, this fabulous bonanza, and—your sweet self, my angel!"

"GRACE:—When this reaches you, I will be far away, never more to return. I go with the one woman who makes all the world to me, now!

"Tell your new friends all. Share our golden secret with them, and they will treat you squarely. Settle up, then go back to our old home, to begin a new life. Forget me—and forgive!

"ONCE YOUR FATHER."

For a moment Grace sat like one in a trance, staring at those horrible words, but then, with a desperate effort she rallied, springing to her feet with a choking cry, tearing that lying paper to bits, and dashing the pieces into the woman's face as she sprung toward her with angry hands.

"'Tis a lie! All a lie, you cowardly schemers!" Grace panted, whipping forth a revolver and covering Mrs. Shaw, as she added: "Where is my father? Tell me—or die!"

CHAPTER VII.

A CHOICE OF EVILS.

THIS was no empty threat. Driven to desperation by those pitiless taunts, by those repeated insults, by that awful fear that harm had befallen her father through the machinations of this evil pair, Grace Elton fully meant every word that crossed her lips just then.

Mrs. Shaw stopped short in her rush as that menacing muzzle rose to the level of her face, almost touching it in that first second. The flush of rage faded a bit, but it was to give

place to an ugly, sneering smile, rather than a look of fear.

Huck Shaw gave vent to an inarticulate cry, and fearing lest he should make a rush to interfere, Grace sprung back toward the chamber door, still holding the woman under cover with her weapon.

"Speak!" she repeated, sternly, her eyes glowing. "Confess, or I'll shoot you like—"

The chamber door flew open behind her, and a blanket was cast over her head and brought down to her middle, strong hands forcing her arms downward with that same swift motion, while a hoarse voice growled:

"Duck an' dodge, or—"

The revolver dropped from the fingers of the thoroughly surprised maiden, striking the floor at her feet, but without exploding.

Mrs. Shaw laughed, mockingly, betraying neither surprise nor gratitude. Instead, there was a touch of anger in her tones as she spoke.

"Who asked you to chip, cully? Will you never learn to—"

"Cheese it!" growled Huck Shaw, pushing forward to where the new-comer was finding it no easy task to keep those muffling folds about his captive, without using more force than even an evil man likes to show toward a young and beautiful maiden. "Le' me run this, pardner, an' you—git back whar you come from!"

With the blanket covering her to the waist, where the ends were twisted almost into a knot, poor Grace was pretty effectually hampered. She did all she could to break away. She tried to shriek aloud, but her voice was nearly smothered by those folds. Twice already she had tripped, kept from falling only by her agility, since her unseen assailant had all he could do in those first moments to keep his grip on that muffler.

There was a vast difference when Huck Shaw assumed control, and the poor girl quickly realized as much. Whether he was so much more powerful than the other, or because he was less fearful of calling those muscular powers into play, Grace felt little more than a child in his savage grasp.

With a quick jerk and twist, Shaw tripped her feet and laid her on the floor, using his legs to keep her quiet while freeing one hand to fumble in his pocket for a stout cord.

Wrapping this about her body, inclosing the ends of the blanket, Huck quickly knotted the thong, thus rendering it impossible for Grace to fling aside the blinder when his savage grip was removed.

The second man grated forth a low warning, but Shaw acknowledged it only with a curt nod, though his wife was more free with her tongue.

"Tisn't your chip, cully! Huck knows what he's tackling, and needs none of your extra lip. You sabe?"

"Thar's bin a heap sight too dug-gun much lip wasted a'ready, to my notion!" growled the human bull-dog, flashing a scowling glance from one face to the other, then stooping to lift the hampered figure in his sturdy arms. "Git yer clapper-clawin' over afore I come back, or thar'll be two o' ye to sabe!"

Grace struggled at that movement, but her vain fight against captivity had greatly reduced her strength, and those heavy folds were shutting out the air so entirely that she was already beginning to grow faint.

"Quit yer kickin', pritty!" growled Huck Shaw, as he bore her over the threshold and into the outer air. "I hain't gwine fer to hurt ye, to speak of. I'm jest savin' ye from heap sight wuss. Fer Roxy Ann is a holy terror when she gits her mad way up—an' you was stirrin' of her up mighty piert—yaas ye was, now, honey!"

It was evident that the ruffian had little dread of Adam Elton's speedy home-coming, since he did not even take the precaution to cast so much as a single glance along the town trail, but strode briskly away from the little cabin, making his way with the precision of one whose course has been laid out in advance.

Poor Grace was hardly conscious of this, she was not insensible, but her brain seemed spinning like a top, and the heat as of a furnace seemed to envelop her.

The burly ruffian bore his helpless burden along toward the rising ground, turning a pile of massive rocks which shut him off from sight of the cabin, bringing him to a not very extensive tract of stunted timber, the trees scattered among the boulders, many of which were hidden beneath wild grape and other vines.

Pressing on until he stood in the shadow cast by a formidable cliff, Huck Shaw lowered his burden to the ground, resting a heavy foot on a fold of the blanket as a precaution against

any attempt to escape, while he gazed keenly, suspiciously around.

"Nobody—how could thar be, ye dug-gun fool critter?" snarling at himself viciously, for wasting time in taking such needless precautions.

Again lifting his captive, he hastened along the face of the cliff for a short distance, then pushed aside a mass of hanging vines, laying bare an irregular opening in the rock, into which he plunged with his burden.

Groping his way through the utter darkness which reigned when that leafy curtain fell, using his feet in lack of his hands, Huck Shaw soon reached the point he had in mind—a pile of mingled leaves and dried grass, upon which he placed Grace Elton.

"Reckon ye a like a weenty snift o' fresh air, honey," he chuckled, while feeling for and cutting the stout thong that held the blanket in place. "Suck in yer fill, pritty, but don't think ye kin make a sneak on the ole man in the dark—don't ye think it, now!"

He loosened the muffler, without entirely removing it, then moved away through the dark, only the slow shuffling of his heavy feet betraying his progress.

A few moments later there came the dull glow of an igniting match, after which the darkness was partially dissipated by the rays streaming from a small lantern.

By its light, Huck Shaw for the first time seemed to realize how nearly he had smothered his precious prize by his precautions, and in his evident anxiety for her safety, he quickly brought about her restoration.

That loathsome touch proved more effectual than if he had been armed with a dozen restoratives!

"Don't—touch me, sir!" panted Grace, shrinking away, weak but still far from broken in spirit. "You coward! You vile slanderer!"

"An so-fo'th, so on likewise, moreover, to be continued whau we kin ketch 'nother breath!" coarsely chuckled the ruffian, rubbing his hands together in grim glee. "Talk 'bout smotherin' a woman! Thar's on'y one way, an' that's to tie up her clapper fer an hour or so!"

Grace sprung to her feet in the wild hope of escape, but her brain fell to reeling, and as she staggered blindly, Huck Shaw quickly caught and reduced her to captivity, using the severed thong to bind her arms and her ankles.

"Thar!" he grimly ejaculated, when so much was accomplished, standing with feet far apart, hands on his hips, in front of his prisoner. "Ef yereckon that's tough, who's to blame but pritty, her own self?"

"You miserable cur!" panted the girl, bitterly.

"Hard words don't bu'st no bones, honey, nur even take the bark off, when ye sling 'em at a ole stager like your uncle Fuller. But—ef you hain't the plum' idjot Roxy Ann called ye, back yen' way, you'll bridle that tongue an' button them lips ontel ye kin make out how mighty much better it'd be fer ye to make a fri'nd then a inemy. Fer you'll feel the need o' the one, heap sight more'n you'll find the lack o' t'other, an' I'm reelin' it off straight as a string, Gracie, gal!"

"A friend—you?"

"Waal, thar's curiousest things come to pass then even so much," deliberately added Shaw, squatting on his heels, elbows on knees and chin supported by his joined palms. "I kin pan out big in the fri'ndly line, ef ye come at me jest the right way. Or—I kin make what little life's left ye a red-hot bell on airth, Grace Elton!"

"There must be a hell—or such demons as you—and that vile hag—would never have been created!"

"Meanin' Roxy Ann? Good enough!" with a malicious chuckle. "I'll tell my lady, jest to see her show them pritty tushes o' hern. It'll be better'n a pinny-pinny-poppy-show! An—but that hain't business, Grace Elton," his tone and manner abruptly changing.

"Mebbe ye reckon we was givin' ye empty wind, back thar? Ef so, you never made a wider mistake in all yer life! 'Twas business—clean, sharp business, I tell ye!

"Roxy Ann told ye never a bit more'n the simple truth, an'—"

"You are lying now, as that hag, your wife, lied then!" flashed the maiden, her spirit still unconquered. "I refuse to listen, and—"

"Then I'll make ye, Grace Elton," with a vicious nod. "I'll gag them dainty jaws o' yours, an' prop yer ears open with a stick, ef I can't come at ye no milder. Shell I do it?"

"You vile brute!"

Swift as thought one hand closed upon her

throat, and with his other, aided by his strong teeth, Huck Shaw quickly fashioned a rude but effectual gag out of his handkerchief. Binding this in place, he drew back to his former position, taking up the thread where he had been forced to drop it a few moments before.

"As I set out to say, pritty, we mean pure business from this hour on! We know yer pap hes some sort o' bonanza up this way, fer ef he hedn't, whar'd he git all that dust to blow in?"

"Roxy Ann wasted a sight o' good wind over it, but the 'count she give ye was straight—Elton *did* run off 'long 'ith Laury, an' he *did* sign over all his other b'longin's to us both, jest as we proved up."

"Now we paid a powerful big price fer that secret you hev the keepin' of, Grace Elton. Paid a powerful price in good dust, never mentionin' the gal he tuck as make-weight! An' hevin' paid that price, you kin bet yer socks we're dead-bent on hevin' the goods!"

"Roxy Ann give ye a weenty taste o' her metal, back yen'. From the way she lashed ye with her tongue, mebbe you kin make a guess whar'd it be to hev her ten claws j'ine in the music. An' thar's jest the one way fer you to git shet o' both—by trustin' me as a fri'nd, an' follerin' the d'rections giv' by your pap in that letter!"

"Show me whar that bonanzy lays; treat me white an' I'll come back at ye 'long the same route. I'll stan' yer fri'nd ag'in'st Roxy Ann, an' never let her lay the weight of a single finger onto ye, no matter how hot she may grow over thinkin' o' Laury. I'll give ye a honest share o' the dingbats, ef the bonanzy pans out anythin' nigh the figger Adam set her at. An' I'll see ye safe on the road to yer old home, ef so be ye want to turn yer face that way. Now—*which?*"

Leaning forward, he removed the gag, waiting for her answer.

It came, promptly enough, though hardly in the shape he wished.

"Even if I possessed the knowledge you say, I'd rather die than betray the trust my father—what have you done to him, you demon?"

"Not a dug-gun thing, wuss then to send a few hot cusses lookin' fer the critter—an' what he toted off 'long 'ith the gal!" grimly retorted the human bull-dog. "Shell I go over it all, ag'in? Shell I git down on my marrer-bones an' swar that Adam Elton run off with Roxy Ann's sister?"

"Swearing to a foul lie can't make it truth, you villain!"

"An' talking to a crazy fool cain't turn her into a wise woman!" growled Huck Shaw, rising to his feet. "Roxy Ann kin mebbe make a better show of it, but I hate the idee o' turnin' ye over to *her*! Ef I *hev* to—an' I will, ef you don't grow wiser, gal—she'll make you suffer heap sight wuss then a common death!"

"Think that over, ag'in'st I come ag'in, Grace Elton!"

CHAPTER VIII. A DELECTABLE PAIR.

NOT a word was spoken by the woman, or the man who had come so suddenly to her rescue, after Huck Shaw took command, until he had lifted the unfortunate girl and borne her in his muscular arms out of the house.

Mrs. Shaw moved to the door, watching them until they were hidden behind the mass of rocks; nor did she turn, even then, until the man back of her pronounced her name:

"Roxy! Haven't you a word to throw at—*am* I a dog, then?"

"Something marvelously like a poodle caught in mischief, Showy Joe, when you put on that sickly look!" laughed the woman, turning to gaze half-sneeringly into that handsome face.

For it was handsome, after its fashion, though only an evil-hearted woman could have viewed it with anything like love.

"Showy Joe" Hoover, he was called, there in the mining country, and right desperately he strove to deserve that title.

He was tall, rather slender in build, though his movements betrayed no lack of muscular power, combined with an activity and suppleness such as very few athletes have been gifted with. With equal courage to back this up, Joseph Hoover would have proven an awkward customer for the best of men to tackle.

He was a blonde, of the purest type. His hair, worn long, in curled locks that brushed his shoulders, was fine as silk, of a flaxen hue, as were the well-kept mustaches shading his full, red lips.

His eyes were of fair size, deep blue in color, but set too closely together for honest beauty. At most times, too, they held a crafty, shifting expression; eyes that rarely looked another

man squarely in the face; eyes that better befitted a treacherous knave than an honest man.

His complexion was very fair, his skin smooth and velvety as that of a healthy child. The sun and weather apparently had no effect upon it, for his being in this wild region was ample proof that he could rough it on occasion.

His clothes were of the elegant cut and fit, of material better fitted to the city than the desert, though the colors were "loud," almost vulgar.

His slender fingers were fairly burdened with rings. A heavy chain of gold was around his neck, festooned over his vest, the ends attached to a pair of watches hidden in pockets on his bosom. His stiff, white shirt-front bore studs and a big cluster-pin of diamonds, while jeweled hoops of gold sparkled in each ear!

Such was the outward semblance of Showy Joe Hoover, gambler, all-round sport, knave and rascal-in-general; a character only too well known at that date throughout the mining regions.

A faint flush came into his face at those mocking words, and his shifting eyes drooped: to rest on the pistol which had fallen from the maiden's hands at his sudden assault.

"*That* might have worked mischief, Roxy, only for my coming out of cover!" he ejaculated, pointing at the weapon. "How could you, darling? I'm all ashiver, even yet, when I think of your terrible risk!"

"Risk, is it, Joey?" laughed the woman, stooping to lift the weapon, her trained fingers quickly releasing the spring and setting the ejector at work, catching the cartridges in one palm as they shot free. "Do you take me for a fool?"

"The little spitfire might have shot you!"

"With these dummies, Joseph?" sneered Mrs. Shaw, holding up one of the shells, letting the light fall squarely across it, showing where the primer had already been deeply indented, then deftly twisting the bullet out of place, blowing into the hollow shell.

"Doctored!"

"Of course, you sweet idiot!" laughed Mrs. Shaw, casting the useless articles out through the open door. "I knew she carried a gun, and I watched my chance to fix it, before opening fire. I did that last night, while the silly was sleeping, great tears standing on her baby cheeks, dreaming of her precious dad, no doubt! And—where is the old codger, Hoover?"

Showy Joe drooped his eyes, one hand quickly rising to smooth his mustache, but his hesitation was barely perceptible; one less thoroughly acquainted with him, would never have noticed it.

"Where he'll be safe enough, Roxy, never you fear!"

"Is he—*so?*" filling the hiatus with a gesture which could not be mistaken.

"I tell you *he's* safe; isn't that sufficient?"

"But—*how* safe?" persisted the woman, with a touch of anger.

"Safe as—the grave, if you *will* have it!" growled Hoover.

There was a brief silence, but the woman showed slight traces of being shocked. Instead, one might have said she was viciously pleased to learn so much!

"Did you—*you* didn't do it yourself, Joe, I hope?" she at length murmured, her face growing more feminine, her strong voice almost musical as she gen'ly laid a hand on his arm, gazing intently into his face the while.

"No, I didn't make the turn, myself, if you must know. Can't you let it drop? Isn't it enough to know that the old rascal will never turn up to dispute our possession of his bonanza?"

"Then—there really *is* one, Joe?"

"Is there?" he echoed, with genuine surprise in both face and voice. "What're we here for, if there isn't?"

"'Twouldn't be the first wild-goose chase we've taken, but—I'm mighty glad to hear you speak so positively, Joe, old boy! For—do you know—I'd almost come to doubt the existence of any such grand bonanza as we've been gloating over—in imagination!"

"Why should you doubt? Haven't we proofs enough? What's come over you, old girl, all of a sudden?"

"It hasn't seemed sudden to me, Joey," with a short, hard laugh, that brief womanliness vanishing.

"Will you tell me just what you mean, Roxy?"

"That with all my prying and spying and sneaking, I've been unable to hit on a single positive clew to such a secret," was the sullen response, her white teeth viciously nipping her red lip. "Not a hint, even! And to think of

the sweet silliness I've plastered all over that little vixen—it makes me hot, old fellow!"

"Did she give you a chance to search this old shack, then?"

"Only by snatches. From the very first, she soured on us both, and only while she was sleeping, or when she ventured as far as the turn in the river trail, yonder, to look for her dad, I never had the ghost of a show. But I pumped her pretty dry, for all that!"

"Or thought you did!" with a show of his teeth. "Come, the way is open now, and we'll see if there isn't some sort of a clew to be found by two pair of mighty keen and hungry eyes!"

Together they searched the cabin, living-room and chamber, even the tiny lean-to in which the cooking was done during warm weather; but all their prying proved labor spent in vain. If the coveted secret was lying beneath that roof, it was hidden too cunningly for their eyes to discover it.

"No use, as I warned you, Joe Hoover," muttered the woman, sulkily. "I don't believe it's here—if anywhere! After all, what is it we're hunting for, anyway?"

"You said it: a clew to the bonanza, of course."

"In what shape is it, then? Tell me that, if you can!"

"Wish I could! Yet—*it's* here, in some shape, or—if not, do you know what comes next, Roxy?"

"Maybe I will, when you show it up!"

"You're convinced that you can't scare or coax the secret out of the girl, aren't you?"

"You were listening. Answer that for yourself, Joe Hoover."

"Well, then it comes to just this: we'll have to fall back on the old game."

"Explain yourself."

"What Grace refuses to give an enemy, she may consent to share with—a lover!" slowly said Hoover, flashing a covert glance into the face of his companion; to droop his lids instantly as he noted the hot, angry flush that leaped into her face at his last words.

"A lover, is it? And that lover must be—*yourself*, Joe Hoover?"

"Unless you reckon Huck Shaw can fill the role better. Can you imagine that sweet-scented Adonis making sheep's-eyes, Roxy?" laughed the dashing gambler, but with a faint touch of nervousness in his tones.

"I can better imagine *you*, kneeling at her feet, with honey on the tip of your tongue and a love-light in your big eyes, only—*you beautiful devil!*" ending with a shrill, hissing whisper as her strong hands closed on his shoulders with a force that made him flinch, her glowing eyes seeming to fairly scorch his face as she strove to meet those shifting eyes with her own.

"Let up, Roxy!" he growled, sulkily. "Will you never learn to trust me as a loyal husband should be trusted?"

"You're mighty anxious to play the part of lover, as you call it, Joe Hoover! Have you fallen in love with that silly fool, so quick? If I thought so—*see!*"

She snatched a slender-bladed dagger from its sheath in her bosom, flashing the steel back and forth above his head while adding:

"If you ever try to play me false, Joseph Hoover! If you turn to another woman, even in your dreams—I'll fill your heart so full of holes that one might use it as a strainer!"

"And I'll fill your sweet mouth so full of kisses that there'll be no room for such ugly words, my angel!" declared the gambler, clasping her to his bosom and suiting the action to his words.

Instantly the dagger dropped from her hands, and she gave embrace for embrace, kiss for kiss. And, man-like, Hoover was first to draw away.

"You're my lawfully wedded wife, Roxy, and as such I swear that you are the one and only woman this wide world contains for me. But—we've gone entirely too far in this dangerous game to think of drawing back, now. *We must win*—don't you see it, darling?"

"I know, but—I hate to think of you playing the lover, even in sport, to that nasty vixen!"

"If you can show me how the game can be won by other means, I'm more than willing to cut the loving out, Roxy," laughed the gambler, once more his usual self. "I'm not hankering after it, I assure you! In some eyes, Grace Elton might pan out a beauty, but in mine—I want something more than a doll, as I proved when I won you, my beauty!"

"She wouldn't be the first girl you've gone astray after, Joe!"

"Not the first—but that was before I met *you*, Roxy. Come; I beg of you to look at it in a reasonable light. We want this bonanza—"

"We must have it, too, Joey!"

"Just so. And if we can't win it in one way, we've got to hatch up another. Can't you see, that, dear?"

"Then—there was nothing found on—Elton didn't carry any such clew about with him, Joe?"

"Not a sign—curse the luck!" with an ugly frown contracting his finely arched brows. "I hoped for better luck, though, of course, it was all a chance. Carrying such a clew, to such a secret, would be a risky thing to do; yet I never before met a man who owned a bonanza who didn't commit just that very folly!"

"You looked, then?" slowly asked the woman.

"You searched him with your own hands, Joe?"

"Didn't I say there was no clew found on the old rascal?" impatiently growled the gambler, his eyes shifting quickly.

"Joe—tell me—you didn't do the job *with your own hands*?" persisted Roxy, strangely nervous on that one point, as it seemed. "Tell me you didn't do it yourself, dear?"

"Of course I didn't do it," growled Hoover, turning abruptly away to gaze out at the still open door; only to shrink back with a low, scared cry as he caught sight of an approaching figure.

"That devil—here! And now!"

CHAPTER IX.

DIAMOND CUT DIAMOND.

It was the face of a craven cur that turned toward the startled woman, and Showy Joe Hoover trembled in every limb, like one under an aque spell.

"Who is it? Not—not Elton?"

The wild fancy paled her own cheeks a bit, but Roxy Ringgold—to give her the name under which she was best known—proved herself far better a man than the rascal she loved with all the ardor of her fiery, untamed nature. Where Hoover retreated, she advanced, one hand seeking a weapon as she cast a keen look through the open door.

"Stop 'em! Don't let that devil inside!" hoarsely panted the terrified gambler, shrinking from the hand which Roxy stretched out in his direction, protectingly, as a mother might try to guard and reassure a frightened child.

"Who is he?" hurriedly muttered the woman, standing like one whom idle curiosity has drawn to the door. "There's two. Which one: black or white?"

"White—devil roast him!"

"You can drop him from cover, if—"

"I can't—you don't—"

"Back—other room—lay low, then!" swiftly breathed his guardian, but without perceptibly moving her lips as she gazed forth upon the strangers, now only a short distance from the cabin.

She heard Hoover creep across to the chamber, the door of which he closed behind him, and despite the mad passion she felt for the knave, something like pitying scorn curled her red lips for an instant.

"Lost his sand, poor devil! But I've got enough for both, and— Hellow, thar, strangers!"

The alteration was marvelous, not alone in voice, but in looks and carriage as well.

The first was harsh and coarse. Instead of her erect, graceful, almost queenly carriage, Roxy Ann half-filled the doorway, leaning against one side, her figure that of a perfect slouch. Nor was the alteration in face hardly less complete; by some strange power she hid her claims to beauty, marring the regularity of her features without any visible attempt at distortion, through which suspicion might be awakened rather than lulled.

Still, in spite of all this, she formed a rather striking picture, just then, being a woman such as a stranger would hardly expect to see in such a desolate region. Then, too, Light-heart Lute was expecting to meet quite another sort of being.

For he was the person whose totally unexpected appearance had so completely unmanned the gambler, and close at his heels shuffled Lemuel Claybank, his lips rolled back and his enormous mouth gaping widely with delight at his perfect success as guide.

"Fo' dar she am, boss, sho'ly!" he declared, at their first glimpse of the vine-wreathed cabin. "I kin smell de hunk o' bread what he didn't fin' time to gib me—cl'ar dis yer fur, so I kin, boss!"

"All right, Lem. Only, you want to mind this: button up that lip, and let it stay so! I'll do the talking, and if you drop even the ghost of a hint— Well, heart disease isn't a patching

to what you'll be afflicted with. You understand?"

"Hope may die, boss, ef I eben fink a word."

But Light-heart Lute was running no chances, just then, and when the cabin was still a number of yards distant, he bade Lemuel stop and wait his word before drawing closer.

Hastily as Showy Joe Hoover had drawn back from the open door at sight of his ancient enemy, the eyes of Light-heart Lute had been still quicker. He had caught a glimpse of a moving figure, though not with distinctness enough to pronounce upon it with certainty. Yet—

"You're another, madam!" he inwardly ejaculated, as Roxy Ann stepped to the door. "Ware hawks, old man!"

There was nothing of this suspicion visible in his frank, honest, smiling face as Light-heart Lute tipped his hat in answer to that brusque salutation.

"Good-afternoon, ma'am!" he cried, bowing as he advanced, hat in hand. "Is Mr. Adam Elton at home?"

Although she fancied herself perfectly on her guard, nothing had been further from Roxy Ringgold's thoughts or expectations than an address like this. She gave a start, her superb figure resuming its wonted erectness, her face more nearly like her ordinary self; only for a single instant, then she slouched over with a shoulder against the other casing, staring stupidly into that manly countenance as she drawled:

"Mister—who's a damn meltin' critter? Ef you reckon you kin run any o' them dug-gun fool rigs onto *me*, jest beca'se I'm a wimmin critter, why—you're clean off yer nut. An' that's jest *what*!"

It was admirably played, but brief though that slip had been, the harm was wrought.

Light-heart Lute recognized Roxy Ringgold, whom he had seen on more than one occasion, and with whose rather shady (to draw it mildly) reputation he was even better acquainted.

But he, too, could play a part on occasion, and nothing of this discovery, or of the serious anxiety which it awakened in his heart, could be read in that mobile countenance.

"Beg pardon, ma'am, but you misunderstood my meaning," he said, bowing again, then adding slowly, like one desirous of averting another humiliating mistake: "I asked for Mr. Elton; first name Adam. Is he at home, at present?"

"Oh! is that the how, stranger?"

"Just that, ma'am," bowed Light-heart, smiling but persistent. "Is the old gentleman at home—pray?"

Roxy Ann yawned lazily, her lifting hand too slow to hide more than the closing operation; but then she drawled forth:

"Not knowin', cain't say, stranger."

"But this is his house, surely!"

"Reckon ye hain't got no money that says so, stranger?"

"I never bet with a lady, but—surely Adam Elton lives here?" insisted Larrimer, his brows arching and a troubled, annoyed expression coming into his face.

"Did, but don't," drawled Roxy Ann, with a sleepy smile showing her magnificent teeth. "Tain't so mighty much in the bigness, stranger, but thar's a powerful sight o' dif'rence atwixt them two words, a'ter all! Don't ye reckon?"

"Don't live— Is that possible?"

"Hes a sort o' leanin' that way, fer a fact, stranger. Any kin to the ole gent? Or—hain't a sher'f, nur nothin', don't reckon? The good land o' liberty! Fer all his saft words an' tony a'rs, I never tuck him fer any much better'n a— What's he wanted fer, stranger?"

"Nothing—in that line," Larrimer hastily said, but with that look of puzzled annoyance deepening in his face. "I'm not an officer of the law, thank gracious! But—I can't see through it, at all!"

"Ef I bed a pa'r o' specs, stranger, I'd mighty glad lend ye the loan o' 'em," laughed the woman, resuming her lazy attitude.

"Gone, you say? May I ask how long since?"

"Waal, I don't know's I kin jest say, as to that," with a reflective look at the white-flecked sky. "But it's bin quite a right smart bit, Mebbe I mought hit a weenty mite closer the len'th, ef I knowed jest the why ye 'pear so powerful anxious fer to ketch the ole gent up!"

"A simple matter of business, ma'am, and it's enough sight more to his interest than to mine that he should keep the appointment made! I was to meet him here, this day, and—"

"Matter o'—waal, I hain't the business eend o' this outfit, an' ef it's business ye want to chin, why—"

"My business was with Adam Elton, you understand, ma'am, but if his daughter will consent to see me for one minute—"

"You don't reckon he'd leave her ahind, do ye? They both skun out, bag an' baggage, too!"

"Without—surely he left some sort of word for me? John P. Green, ma'am! If you'd only take the trouble to reflect, perhaps—I can't really believe he'd go without leaving anyway a word of excuse, if not explanation, for me!"

"Ef so, he never bothered *me* with it," curtly nodded the woman, but turning her head a little and curving a hand at the side of her red lips, she sent forth a stentorian shout, followed by the words: "I say, you Huck! O-h-h, Pap!"

"O-h-h, *hesh!*" came an answering blast, as the burly figure of Huck Shaw came in sight from among the scattered bowlders. "Ef ye split that thrapple o' yours, old gal, billy-bug-gun ef I pay fer the patchin' of it up! Fer—Hellow, stranger!" seemingly just then observing the presence of another. "How d'y'?"

"A feller lookin' for Elton, Pap," explained Roxy Ann, hurriedly. "I tole him the ole gent hed skun out, but—waal, 'pears like he didn't keer to take the word of a lady, so I yelped fer you."

"Beg pardon, ma'am, and yours, sir," hastily interposed Light-heart Lute, who by no means wished to come to blows, just then. "Of course I couldn't doubt the word of a lady, but I had to blame Elton for not waiting to keep the appointment he made with me."

"P'intment, eh?" growled Shaw, still suspiciously eying the young man. "That means a sort o' meetin', don't it?"

"Yes, sir. I was to meet Adam Elton at his home—this very spot, if I'm not greatly mistaken—to-day, between noon and dusk. I'm here, but where is Elton?"

"Mebbe that's why he skun out in sech a hurry, Pap," suggested the woman, in undertones, as though for his ears alone. "You've got the bill of sale all right, hain't ye, Huck?"

"Bet yer sweet life I jest hev, now!" gruffly growled the human bull-dog, pulling forth the document and shaking it defiantly before Larrimer's face. "Thar she am, stranger, straight as a string, an' drawed up so keerful that it'll hold water ag'in a hull rijiment o' dug-gun critters who might be fools 'nough fer to try to pick a hole into it! An' ef so be *you're* one o' them—"

"No, no, my dear fellow!" ejaculated Lute, falling back a pace with admirably counterfeited alarm. "Don't fly off the handle, I beg of you! I bring no claims—I wouldn't take the place as a gift, for—"

"It's jest low-down 'nough fer the likes o' us, mebbe?"

Huck Shaw seemed more than eager for a row, but Light-heart Lute showed little disposition to meet him on that basis, and after a forbidding wink from Roxy Ann, the bull-dog moderated his tactics.

Larrimer assured them that his business had nothing to do with the cabin or aught in that vicinity, and after examining the bill of sale, simply to satisfy its present owner, as he took pains to make perfectly clear, he begged pardon for the trouble he had given them.

"After all, Elton's the biggest loser, though his fool trick has brought me far out of my course. I'll give him a bit of my mind, when we next meet up with each other—be sure! Then—he didn't say just where he was striking out for?"

"Back East, I reckon, though I cain't say jest sure. 'Peared like he wasn't honin' fer cluss questionin', an' as we'd made a pritty tol'able barg'in, it come easy 'nough fer to humor the ole critter," grinned Shaw, carefully stowing the paper away in his bosom.

"And—his little girl?" ventured Larrimer. "Of course she went with him? How long since, did you say?"

"Didn't say, but I kin; jest fo' days, to a nick, stranger!"

"I can't make out why he didn't wait, but as he *has* gone, there's nothing for me to waste more time over. Good-day, ma'am, and you, sir!"

"Gittin' 'long to'rds night, stranger; better stay an' make a new start in the mornin', hedn't ye?" suggested Roxy. "We kin eat ye both, an' make out to sleep ye, too, ef the nigger wouldn't mind bunkin' in the kitchen, fer once."

"A thousand thanks, ma'am, but reckon we'll mog along. We've lively legs, and can make a right smart piece before dark. I've lost too much time over Elton, already! Well, it's *his* loss, not mine, please the pigs!"

CHAPTER X.

LEMUEL'S GOOD RIGHT ARM.

WITHOUT giving a chance for a more pressing invitation to stop over night, Light-heart Lute nodded to Shaw, tipped his hat to Roxy, then turned and strode briskly away, signing Lemuel to follow in silence.

He was by no means certain that he had completely hoodwinked that couple, but he never took a look back, although he knew the odds were at least even that a bullet might be sent after him.

For he had not the slightest doubt as to who those unknown enemies of poor Adam Elton were, after this meeting.

From the very first he had dreaded being too late to aid the "little girl" on whose account the murdered miner had suffered his bitterest pangs before relief came.

He had made all possibly haste, and fortune had favored him so far as discovering the lone cabin was concerned. Lemuel had recognized a curious landmark, and then they struck a trail which led them directly to the place, reaching it on the afternoon of the day following their strange encounter with Adam Elton.

"Gone, four days ago! Took the girl with him! Sold out his place! All lies, from start to finish!" was his mental summing up.

Lemuel followed in silence, as bidden, but when the lone cabin was lost to sight, and Light-heart Lute still showed no signs of pausing, or of giving an explanation, curiosity reached its limits, and Lem ventured:

"Did—was de little lady glad fo' see you, boss?"

"So terrible glad, Lemuel, that I reckoned I'd never get away without leaving some part of me behind—as a keepsake!" with a short, hard laugh, at the same time casting a quick glance over one shoulder. "So powerful glad, Lem, that I wouldn't wonder a bit if she sent after us to add another farewell—forever!"

"Funny, de ways dif'ent folks has!" mumbled the negro, dejectedly. "W'en I'm so pow'ful glad to see folks, I done ax 'em to grub—I does, fo' suah!"

"So did they, but I didn't believe their cooking would agree with our delicate constitutions, Lemuel," laughed Light-heart Lute, once more his usual self, so far as outward indications went. "Madame Roxy is a terrible nice lady, and all that, of course: being of the fair sex, she couldn't well be otherwise. But—I'm afraid she forgets to wash her hands before mixing the dough, Lemuel! And I saw too many loose hairs embroidering her gown not to have doubts concerning her hash. And—but that's a big plenty, my boy, and if I make any more suggestions, you'll see my boots beginning to come up red lane!"

Lemuel looked far from satisfied, but he dared not risk any further hint or remonstrance. Light-heart Lute was master, firm and even, stern on occasion, though ordinarily so kind and jolly.

"That isn't the worst of it, neither, Lemuel Claybank," gravely added the adventurer, all the while pushing briskly forward, following the river trail up which they had so recently passed. "We've been hoodooed, all two both of us!"

"De good Lawd, boss!"

"Melancholy, isn't it? And yet a fact, Lemuel! Just hoodooed, from crown to sole, from side to side, from back to front and double-cross ways into the bargain!"

"Now, I dare say you fully believe that we met a gentleman called Adam Elton, last night?"

"Don't, boss!" huskily mumbled Lem, casting a nervous glance about.

"I lay under that impression, my own self, Lemuel," persisted the adventurer, never slackening that rapid pace. "And right there is where the hoodooing process began. We didn't meet any such person. We never found a half-buried man, nor he didn't die when that big cat chased you into the hole. In fact, there never was any such being as Adam Elton! Deny it if you dare, Lemuel!"

"Ef you say so, boss," meekly mumbled the subdued negro.

"If I do say so Lemuel, it's because I have to. I've recently had a revelation, and the spirit—"

"Wha'—wha'—not a spook, boss?" quivered the negro, turning almost ashen gray, his teeth chattering with superstitious terror, his great eyes protruding as he cast a fearful look around them.

"It appeared only to me, Lemuel, and your vision is far too muddy to make it out. But—eyes to the front, and still those bones, or you

may anger it into taking a bite out of the back of your neck! So! Now I'll finish:

"That revelation contained a warning specially for you, Lemuel. The spirit swore that if you ever let drop aught of what we so foolishly believed took place at our last camp, or if you ever dared whisper the name of Adam Elton, no matter to whom, or where you might be, a mighty hand would grip your neck, lifting you up clear of the ground and shaking you so hard that your joints would fly asunder, and your flesh he sowed over seventeen acres—long measure! Think of that, Lemuel, please!"

"I—I don't like to, boss!"

"Then forget threat and subject together. You're perfectly safe so long as you're wise enough to steer clear of that one dangerous point, and if I see you beginning to slip, be sure I'll lend you a kick hard enough to lift you over to the right side of the fence!"

Light-heart Lute was not talking entirely at random, though it may seem that way, on the surface. For one thing, he wanted to make sure of Lemuel, in the perilous times which were almost surely before them, did not make bad matters worse by reckless talk. For another, he wanted to guard against dangerous curiosity on his part.

Lute felt fairly confident that they would be followed and spied upon after leaving the lone cabin. Although he could not know that he himself had been recognized for what he really was, rather than simple John Green as he had announced himself, he had recognized that woman, and knew enough of her to feel that almost any means would be taken rather than run the risk of defeat in the nefarious plans she surely had formed.

Unless silenced in some fashion, Lem might suspect what was wrong, and by his actions put the possible spy on his guard too soon.

Without openly looking back, Light-heart Lute managed to keep fairly well posted as to what was going on in their rear, and before their retreat had covered half a mile of ground he knew that Huck Shaw was dogging their steps!

He gave no hint to his companion, and by free use of his nimble tongue kept him from looking back, as well as contriving to set the simple fellow more at ease.

Fortunately this did not have to last much longer. The spot he had in mind, as most suitable to wind up that dangerous espial, was not more than a couple of miles from the Elton cabin, and when this was reached Light-heart Lute called a halt.

"Here's wood, water, and all that goes to make an ideal camp, Lemuel, my boy!" he cried, gazing keenly around, picking out a spot which could be approached from only one point without discovery. "You're toting game enough for supper, and there's a round of coffee left, enough for a hog—and a gentleman! It's a bit early, of course," with a squint at the declining sun, "but what's the odds, so long's you're happy?"

"Shell I set de fiah, boss?"

"Not just yet. Lem, were you lying when you bragged of that good right arm of yours? Did you ever pitch ball?"

"Good Lawd, boss! ef I on'y hed a fat ole bar fo' all de games I done won in de box!" enthusiastically cried the darky, his big eyes aglow, his thick lips working, his right arm swinging back and forth, with long fingers working as though already gripping the ball. "Ef I jes' had a nickel fo' each boy I done fan out—good Lawd, boss! I'd want a pow'ful train ob freight-kyars fo' tote 'em all, so I would!"

"You can sling a stone right piert, I admit, Lemuel," lazily drawled Larrimer, half-reclining on the grass which grew thickly near the spring, filling his pipe as he spoke. "But hard throwing isn't all it takes to win a game of ball nowadays, you understand."

"Doan' I know, boss? An' hain't I done ketched 'em all? Hain't I got all dem yar kyurves an' shoots an' drops an' rises an' fannin' tricks, yight hyar in dese books?" grinned the excited fellow, working his long, bony fingers rapidly.

"So you say, but— Wish I had a ball here for you to practice a bit with, Lem. I'm no slouch in that line, my own self, if I do say it, but I never could do anything with a stone. Can you?"

For answer Lem selected a stone, then pointed out a stunted tree at a considerable distance, which he hit squarely, grinning as he said:

"What's de mattah wid dat kyurve, boss?"

"Did the stone really take a curve?"

"Wha' yo' eyes, boss? Di'n' yo' see how he kyarl up, like he was gwine wrop yight yound he neck—eh?"

"So did you—in your mind, Lemuel," yawned Larrimer, slowly brushing one hand across his eyes like one chasing sleep away.

Instead, those eyes, very keen and comprehensive, were taking note of a crouching, shapeless form stealing through the stunted bushes, evidently trying to reach a covert near enough to the spring to catch the words passing between the twain.

It was Huck Shaw, as Light-heart Lute had long since distinguished, and it was merely to keep Lem Claybank from discovering the spy that he broached the subject of base-ball, knowing from past experience what a complete "crank" it had made of the colored lad.

He had little difficulty in divining what particular point the spy was making for, and though he knew he was running a certain amount of risk in permitting such a near approach, Lute was waiting for Shaw to attain that covert before making any decided move.

With this end in view, he kept bantering the negro, who really did perform wonders with his good right arm and such clumsy substitutes for his beloved ball. Although with less certainty, owing to the irregular shape of the stones, Lem gave examples of all the different curves, shoots, and other eccentricities which comprise the "whole art of pitching."

Light-heart Lute purposely directed Lemuel toward a portion of the grounds where his pitching feats would not interfere with the movements of the spy, occasionally pointing out certain objects which he wanted hit, or around which he wished Lem to curve a missile.

"You're not *all* a fraud, Lemuel," he said, approvingly, after a time. "You ought to make a success in the box—or would, if it wasn't for the foolish prejudice against your color. See here, old man!" sitting erect, like one who has suddenly conceived a grand idea. "I'll give you a chance, if we both live to get back to civilization again!"

"Dat's all I ax, boss," eagerly. "Jes' a chance—dat's all!"

"You shall have it, sir! A glorious chance, too! I'll get up a club of royal foreigners, from a yellow John to a tattooed cannibal! And I'll turn you into a Spaniard—Senor Don Lemuelo, the Spanish Dude!"

"Good Lawd!"

"Shut up! I'll do it—sure! Then you'll be better even than a white man, and the ladies—why, Lem, they'll just paralyze you all over! They'll smother you with kisses, and—but you've got to swear off on onions, Lemuel!"

"Yo' foolin' boss!" chuckled Lem, his head drooping, bashfully. "How dem white ladies come to kiss dis— G'way, now, boss!"

"Don't forget that I'll bill you—in letters a foot high, Lem—as the Spanish Dude, and that'll make all the difference in the world! It's a glorious idea, and we'll carry it out, too! But—you must keep that good right arm of yours in training, Lemuelo, and— Got a rock?"

"Bet I has, boss!"

"I saw something rustle the leaves of that bush, yonder, just now—a skunk, probably; but see if you can't knock him out o' the box, Lem!" cried Larrimer, in clear tones, pointing at the cover beneath which Huck Shaw had snugly bestowed himself!

Whiz! went the stone, and as it pierced the very center of the bush, the spy leaped to his feet with a howl of angry terror, bounding away in headlong flight, while Light-heart Lute cried, laughingly:

"Didn't I tell you 'twas a skunk, Lemuelo?"

And drawing a revolver, he sent a brace of bullets whistling in close proximity to the fleeing spy.

CHAPTER XI.

SHOWY JOE CROWDS THE GAME.

"Who be they, an' what fetched 'em hyar, anyway?" were the first words uttered by Huck Shaw, after Light-heart Lute turned away and took the river trail in company with his ebony companion.

"Keep an eye on them, but don't make it too plain you're watching," hastily muttered Roxy Ann, stepping back from the door without changing her slouching demeanor until sure a backward glance of those honest blue eyes could not detect the alteration.

She was reaching out a hand to the chamber door, when it swung open and Showy Joe Hoover showed himself, asking in a whisper:

"Has he gone? Why didn't you—"

"They're both gone. If you wanted anything in particular done, why didn't you say so before hunting your hole, cully?"

The gambler flushed a bit, more because of

the half contemptuous look which bore those curt words company, than the question itself. A man must fall low indeed when he can bear even an implied charge of cowardice from a woman, without a sense of burning shame.

"They've hit the river trail, like they was pullin' foot fer town," Huck Shaw sent back over his shoulder. "You know 'em, Joe? Surely they hain't tryin' a mix in this job?"

"It don't seem possible, but—that fellow's a very devil!"

"What's he gwine off, foot-free, fer, then? What'd you give the wink to play easy, Roxy?" an ugly look in his bull-dog face matching the vicious snarl in his voice.

"You tell, cully!" and one strong hand closed on Hoover's shoulder, her glowing eyes staring keenly in the face. "In one word: Live or die? Wasn't it you that said, a bit ago, we've got to win this game?"

"Live, if he'll keep hands off! But—reckon he meant anything more than showed on the surface, Roxy?"

"I could give a better guess if I knew more about the fellow. He said John P. Green; is that his right name?"

"No. He's Luther Larrimer, better known as Light-heart Lute, and the Lad of Luck—devil toast him!"

Roxy Ringgold gave a start, her expression changing to a degree. She had heard more than one story concerning that dashing adventurer, and for the first time she began to realize the extent of their peril if—but how could he suspect aught?

"Talk quick, cully!" she said, frowning, after a glance that showed her the two strangers just vanishing from sight at the crook in the river trail. "Tisn't too late to call the turn on 'em, even yet! Is it follow and shoot, or—what?"

"Let 'em go, if they will, only—if Shaw could play spy long enough to make sure this retreat isn't a dodge, why—"

"Take the scent, Huck!" sharply cried the Amazon, striding to the door. "Don't let 'em throw you off before you are dead sure they're playing white. Go—you know enough without my priming you!"

"That's what!" grimly grunted the human bulldog, looking to his revolvers as he took up the trail.

"Try to hear what they talk about, pard!" the gambler sent after him. "If our game—drill 'em both, for keeps!"

"Bet I will!"

Huck Shaw was watched until he passed that turn in the trail, and then, turning to face her companion squarely, Roxy Ringgold said:

"He's not much for pretty, but—Huck Shaw wouldn't have taken water for any one devil: red, white, black or yellow! While you—"

"Showed better sense," interpolated the gambler, with a forced smile, beginning to rally after the unnerving shock he had received. "Shall I prove that to you, Roxy?"

"I only wish you could, Joe!" with a partly smothered sigh, a wistful glow chasing that half-contemptuous light from her big eyes. "I always did hate a cur, and the mere thought of you being— I'd have to smite my own lips for daring to utter the nasty word, Joe!"

"And I'll smite them for—so!" as he pressed his lips to hers. "I didn't take cover simply because I recognized the Lucky Lad, Roxy, my girl. He's a bad man, I'll admit, but I'm no slouch, my own self!"

"Then—but you *did* hunt your hole, Joe!"

"Because I knew the devil would smell a mighty loud mice were he to catch a square look at your servant, Roxy! I don't like his coming here and asking for Elton. I don't like his hurrying off at such a late hour of the day, instead of closing with your offer of bed and grub; but, if he'd known I was here, he'd have been dead sure something was wrong! Didn't I ever tell you about that Old Mystery affair, Roxy?"

"What! this isn't the same fellow?"

"The very same!" with an ugly snarl in his tones. "Only for him, and his giant pard, I'd have made my everlasting stake that whirl! As it was—well, I was mighty lucky to get off with a whole skin!"

For several minutes there was silence between the evil pair. Both had ample food for thought, and both were plainly dreading the outcome.

Roxy Ringgold was the one to break silence first:

"You don't really think he's playing the same role now, Joe?"

"It don't seem possible! How could he have learned anything? We covered our trail too thoroughly for that."

"The old man, Joe?" whispered the woman, gazing intently into the face of her companion. "You had all signs blotted out? They couldn't have stumbled across the—anything?"

"Not if he was a hound running on four legs in place of two!" was the prompt response. "Yet—I'm free to own it makes me a bit uneasy, old girl! And—I'm going to crowd the game all I can, from this time on!"

"We've got to win, of course, Joe? There isn't to be any jumping the game before the bonanza is ours?"

"Not if twenty devils, each one worse than the Lad of Luck, jump in between!" was the vicious response. "It's the one chance of a lifetime, Roxy, and when fairly won, we'll be able to skip this risky way of living, and play tony high-rollers across the big drink!"

"Just you and me, Josey? Huck couldn't figure in a role like that!"

"Just us two, Roxy! And—you'll not kick too nasty over my playing off with that little girl? It's the only way—don't you see? You tried to scare her, and failed. If I can win by lying, why not?"

"Don't try to make it too real, cully!" slowly warned the jealous amazon, tapping her bosom with a finger, recalling the wicked weapon which found a sheath therein. "I'm mighty apt to strike as I love; once for all!"

A frown flitted across the gambler's face at this unreasonable suspicion, but he held his impatience well in hand, simply saying:

"You can follow and listen, if nothing less will suit you, Roxy; but don't forget that girl is far from being an idiot, and if she has the least cause for doubting that I am working flat against you and Huck, at the risk of my own sweet life—good-by John!"

"I know. I'll trust you from start to finish, since I've got to trust you at all, Joe. Go make your lay-out. I'll have a little hunt of my own, in here, while waiting for Shaw to report."

She turned away and entered the chamber. Hoover gazed after her, irresolutely. This sudden yielding looked suspicious in his eyes. Yet, what could he do?

With Light-heart Lute in the field, he dared not waste more time. And he had seen enough of Grace Elton, himself unseen, to know that it would be a work of time, patience and great ingenuity, to break her will and extort a full confession from her lips.

He left the cabin, moving rapidly along in the direction taken by Huck Shaw with his captive, only pausing before that leafy curtain to make sure there were no curious eyes watching his movements.

"She'll be coming—devil toast her for a jealous fool!" he viciously muttered, barely above his breath. "All right! I'll give her something to chew on, if that little spitfire don't drop to the track too soon! And—if I could carry off both bonanza and girl, it'd no more than serve my top-lofty madam just right!"

By which it may be surmised that, while Roxy Ringgold might be jealous, she surely was not the fool Showy Joe called her—in his mind!

Creeping under the mass of vines, Showy Joe Hoover cautiously made his way into the cave, pausing when pretty sure the fair prisoner must have noted his approach, through her sense of hearing.

"I say—Miss Elton!" he whispered, in guarded tones, pausing for an answer which did not come, then adding: "I can't see you, but I know you're nigh enough to hear my words, Miss Elton. They tried to keep it from me, but I watched that ugly brute bring you here, and—I'm risking my very life to say this much, Grace!"

"Who are you?"

"Your friend, if you'll let me prove it. Grace!"

"My name is Elton. I don't know you, but—you are a friend to the Shaws?"

"They reckon so, but—can I trust you, Miss Elton? You laugh—"

"I really couldn't help it, sir. You are free, of course, since you came here of your own accord: I am bound, hand and foot; yet you seem to fear I can harm you!"

"My very life rests in your hands, Miss Elton!" earnestly declared the gambler, moving a bit nearer, striking a match and holding it so the light fell upon his own face. "One word from your lips—one little hint to those two devils, back at the house—as to this visit, or that I offered to aid you against them, would consign me to death as surely as though a bolt from heaven had smitten my poor head!"

"You are a stranger—I never saw you be-

fore!" said Grace, as the short-lived light vanished.

"Perhaps 'twould have been better for me if I'd never seen you, Miss Elton!" sighed Showy Joe, throwing a bit of sentiment into both words and tone. "But—having seen you—I can't stand by and see those wicked people torture you as they have schemed. I couldn't do it, Grace, though I knew it meant my certain death to interfere!"

"Yet—you are one of them?" slowly uttered the fair captive.

"Only in name, not in heart, dear Miss Elton," was the hasty reply. "I can explain it all—I can make you see that I'm really not accountable for what's been done, or what is still impending. But—there isn't time, just now. I'm risking life every minute I spend in here! One or the other may come here, at any moment, and if I'm found—you can guess what would be my fate!"

"Why do you linger, then?"

"Because I'm a fool, perhaps!" with an accent of gloomy bitterness. "Because I'm not stony-hearted enough to stand idly by with folded arms while an angel—while they carry out their evil plot!"

"If you are honest, as you say, and my friend," slowly uttered the unseen captive, after a brief silence; "tell me why my father does not come home?"

"Because he can't!"

"What! you don't mean—he is not—" quavered Grace, her wonderful nerve not quite proof against the sickening dread conjured up by that blunt sentence.

"I don't think it's quite as bad as that, dear Grace," soothingly spoke the villain, drawing still closer, resolved to "crowd the game" as much as it would stand. "I really believe your poor father is alive—as yet!"

"Where? Why does he not come home, then?" panted the tortured girl.

"Because they've got him confined, much as you are, dear Grace," he hastened to assure the maiden. "I learned that much, but I couldn't make out just how, or where, or when they captured him. I learned, too, that they counted on making him tell where his bonanza lay, by swearing to torture you—poor child!"

"Oh, sir, if you could only—"

"Hist!" for your life—not a word of my visit!" hastily whispered Showy Joe, shrinking close to the wall as there came the sound of heavy footfalls on the loose stones without the entrance.

Huck Shaw entered the cave, cursing the darkness, and while he was striking a light, Showy Joe stole out of the den, unseen.

CHAPTER XII.

LEMUEL'S REMARKABLE EXPLOIT.

"Just to make it more binding, you know!" laughed Light-heart Luke, as he fired those shots, aiming at the rocks beside the fleeing spy, rather than at his person direct. "A skunk is terrible fond of music, and—didn't the lead screech just elegant, Don Lemuel?"

Glancing from the rocks, whistling shrilly as their battered surface rent the air, those bullets caused Huck Shaw to execute some wonderful bounds and comical contortions, without lessening the speed of his flight.

"Fo' de good Lawd!" gasped Lemuel, staring in wide-mouthed amazement at this totally unexpected result of that pitch.

"Making a home-run off your pitching, Lem," laughed Larrimer. "You want to do better than that when you pose as the Spanish Dude, or the enemy will just naturally knock you out of the box—sure!"

"Shell I ketch de warmint, boss? I kin do it—des as easy!"

"Would you dare tackle him, Lem?" curiously asked Luther.

"Ef you say so, boss, I'll done fotch de critter back beah fo' suah!" was the eager response.

"Doan' no fool white man make no home-run off me—no sah! Doan' make no home-run off dis chile!"

There was no pretense there, and Light-heart Luke gave a nod of grim approval. There was good metal lying inside that dusky hide, and it was with a comfortable sense that he could depend on Lemuel in a tight pinch, that Larrimer patted the "colored phenomenon" on a shoulder while saying:

"Never mind, pardner. Let the rascal go, for the present. If we really want him for anything, I'll know right where to clap a hand on his shoulder."

"Den—you done knowed he was dah, all de while, boss?"

"There's mighty little that I don't know,"

Lem, when on the trail. I have eyes located on every knob and corner, then. Yes, I knew the fellow was there, looking for notes. Hope he feels paid for his trouble!"

"Oh, mamma!" ejaculated Lem, in comical chagrin. "Ef I des bin know all dat, boss! Make no home-run off me, he wouldn't! I des bu'st he fool' head wide open! I des—ef I only bin know he was dah!"

"You scared thirteen kinds of daylight out of him, as it was, Lem, so you needn't mourn," laughed Light-heart Luke, stepping across to the spring and taking a hearty drink. "Fill your tank, my lovely Dude, for we've got to shift our boarding place, and we mayn't be quite so lucky in hitting another such spring. Drink—lively, too!"

Without exactly comprehending what all this meant, Lemuel obeyed, then picked up their game and traps, following his master as Larrimer moved rapidly away, plunging into the thick lying rocks and crags, at a course nearly at right angles with the one taken by the fleeing spy.

In a short time, Light-heart bade Lem await his return, rapidly climbing up a pile of rocks, from the top of which he soon caught a glimpse of Huck Shaw, plainly heading for the Elton cabin.

"That's all I wanted to learn of you, Mr. Shaw!" he muttered, with grim satisfaction, lying low to avoid possible discovery should the discomfited spy look behind him for pursuers. "You're hunting your hole, though you've precious little news to carry back to Roxy! And she's entirely welcome to all she can make of it, too!"

Watching until certain that Huck Shaw had no present intention of dogging them further, even if his suspicion had not been completely swept away by the innocent words he had been able to eavesdrop, Light-heart Lute turned his thoughts in the direction of his dusky companion.

As a matter of course he intended probing this mystery to the very bottom. He had given a dying man his sacred oath to aid and protect his "little girl." He suspected other evil, then, and now he knew it had or was being worked against Grace Elton, even as it had fallen upon the father.

Up to date, he had looked upon Lemuel Claybank as little better than a fantastic toy, to be sported with in idle moments, but by no means one who could be depended upon in an emergency. But now—

"There's heap sight more sand in the fellow than I ever gave him credit for!" was his mental decision. "He wanted only a nod to chase and tackle that rascal, and if looks don't lie, Mr. Huck Shaw would have passed a mighty bad quarter of an hour, once those big paws fairly closed upon his frame!"

"Now—I've got to go back to that cabin. Shall I do as I at first intended: place Lem in a hole, to await my coming—if I ever pull through? Or—tell him the whole truth, and trust him to hold one end level?"

Although he had only spoken to two persons at the cabin, Light-heart Lute felt firmly convinced that he had caught sight of at least one other, while approaching the building.

"A man, I'm betting long odds. If a woman, why didn't she show up, to back Roxy in her sparring match? It couldn't have been Grace, for Adam called her his little girl. Then, too, any one inside that cabin surely must have heard my questions, and a daughter would never have lain low and listened to all that rot about her father! So—I reckon I'll have a sober talk with my dandy dude!"

Light-heart Lute was as good as his word, once his mind was fairly made up; but, for all that, he bided his time before enlightening Lem.

Picking their way through the broken ground, drawing a little nearer the Elton cabin, while partly encircling the place, Light-heart Lute at length reached a spot where he felt sure they might indulge in a fire for supper, without running any risk of attracting unwelcome attention.

He gave Lem a liberal share of the remaining coffee, and topped it all off with a dose of brandy. Then, while they lay at a safe distance from the dying fire, smoking their pipes, Larrimer opened his budget.

By first judiciously praising Lem for the "sand" he had displayed in the spy episode, making him feel that he now looked upon him as a man in more than mere dimensions, Light-heart paved the way to what might lie before them that night.

Rapidly sketching the material points gleaned from Adam Elton, he told Lem of the vow he

had taken, and the great peril which he believed was menacing Grace Elton. And after relating the lies told him by the people found in possession of the cabin, he added:

"I firmly believe that those rascals have got the little girl in their power, Lem. I believe she is even now held a prisoner in her own house! But—shall we permit her to remain a prisoner, Lem?"

"No, sah, boss!" was the indignant response, his homely face lit up with sturdy resolution. "Ef you le' me go, boss, I des bu'st dar fool' heads wide open!"

"What if they were to object, Lem? What if they had guns?"

"What I keef fo' dey guns, boss? Ain' you tote guns, too? Des gi' me one dem guns, boss, an' I walk yight frough dem 'funnelly warmints! Or—I kin knock 'em out des wid a club—an' dornicks, boss!"

Light-heart Lute leaned across and lightly touched the negro's wrist. The pulse beat strong and regular. This was not the result of excitement, and more than ever Larrimer began to think he had found an unlooked-for treasure in this gaunt fellow.

Still, he would not decide too hastily. Although the sun had set and it was rapidly growing dark, he knew it was too early to open the campaign, as yet. And that interval was spent in still further testing the colored boy.

The result was satisfactory, on the whole. Lemuel proved full of pluck, so far as could be told without seeing him in actual combat, and as Light-heart Lute had little expectation of coming to blows—or shots—with the Shaw outfit, that night, he finally gave Lemuel permission to play a part in the work before them.

"But you don't want to forget the conditions, my good fellow," was the grave addition. "You're to act as reserve guard, and lie low where I station you, making no move on your own hook until you hear me distinctly call to you—out loud, you understand?"

Lemuel promised implicit obedience, and doubtless he fully intended to follow instructions to the very letter, at the time. But for all that, a burning thirst for glory was fated to plunge him headlong into a truly remarkable position that night.

It was an easy task for so practiced a mountaineer as the Lad of Luck to lead the way direct to the Elton cabin, despite the broken nature of the ground and the darkness.

There was a light shining dimly through the front window, across the inside of which a curtain was closely drawn. The front door was closed, but Larrimer felt confident that the Shaw outfit was within, and hoping to surprise their secrets, through attaining some point from whence he could catch their words, if talking, he bade Lemuel lie in wait at a safe distance, then stole silently away.

For some little time Lem remained where he had been stationed, but he gradually grew nervous with inaction, longing most ardently to still further prove his manhood and value to his "boss."

Little by little he edged forward, until he could command a fair view of the cabin and its immediate surroundings. This contented him for a time, but presently he began fidgeting again.

"When he gwine holler out? Why doan' he fotch on de sarcus? I'm des a common, brack niggah, but—ef I was playin' boss, bet yo' sweet life dey fink a hull bumbly-bee nes' done bu'st wide open 'twixt dar hine-laigs, 'fore dis yeah time—dey des would, now!"

He fingered the revolver with which Light-heart Lute had intrusted him, betraying the love which only one of his race can show toward the first "gun" that fortune has bestowed upon him. He leveled it at the cabin, at the lighted window, at the chimney-top, and then—gave a sudden start as he noticed the long limb of the tree which reached out toward the roof.

"De good Lawd! w'y di'n' I see dat ar' fo' de boss done sloped? Could shin up dah—git on ruff—heah ebbery word dem warmints bla'at out—des as easy! Ef de boss hedn't bin so—bin so—"

Alas! temptation was already assailing the young fellow, and rapidly getting the upper hand, too!

It seemed such a very simple matter to Lemuel! And he was such a magnificent climber, too! Never a squirrel was nimbler, never a possum could cling more surely to a swaying bough!

And—the boss was so very anxious to overhear those rascally schemers, shut up so closely inside the cabin!

"Wondah ef he would boot dis niggah ef—co'se he wouldn't!" with a sniff of lofty indigna-

tion at the debasing thought. "De boss is a clean gemman, he is! An' den—he nebber know nuffin' 'tall 'bout it ontwel I tell him des all dey say, wud fo' wud—so dar!"

That was the final struggle with conscience, and carefully securing his revolver in the leather thong twisted about his waist, Lem crept toward the tree, pretending that he was just looking for Light-heart Lute, to point out that aerial ladder of hope!

"Sorry I doan' fin' him!" mumbled Lem, with difficulty smothering a chuckle over his "bad luck" in that search. "Would wait, an' hunt funder, on'y—dem fool' folks gittin' pow'ful sleepy, yight now! Dey go bunk in fo' I kin fin' de boss. Den—he kick, fo' mighty suah!"

That reflection was enough. Lemuel dropped all scruples, clasped the trunk and "swarmed" up it like a particularly active bear.

He reached the limb already alluded to, and noting its strength and apparent soundness, he crawled out along it, eager to gain the roof where he confidently expected to win so much glory.

He saw success already within his grasp, and either his keen ears or an active fancy caught indistinct sounds as of human voices engaged in earnest conversation, rising through the wide-mouthed chimioey, now almost directly beneath his crouching form!

"Doan' I say so, a'ready?" was his exultant whisper to his own ears as he crept still further along, with greater haste and eagerness. "Ef dar bain't somebody mos' mighty surprise dis yer' night, den I—"

And that somebody was fated to be Lemuel Claybank, first of all!

The limb suddenly broke beneath him, and he toppled over, flinging out his arms in a vain effort to break his fall! And then he plunged headlong directly into the chimney, up which the hot smoke was curling!

CHAPTER XIII.

A GENERAL UPSETTING.

BOTH Light-heart Lute and Lem Claybank had guessed aright: the trio of evil schemers were gathered inside the Elton cabin, busily engaged in discussing the present situation, and trying to see their safest and speediest path to success.

If Huck Shaw had been a little less tender of his own reputation, and had given a full and faithful account of his adventures while in the act of playing spy, perhaps the arguments might have been shorter, more nearly unanimous. But he made it appear that the couple he had shadowed were intent only on getting out of that region with the least possible loss of time, and at the same moment he swore that this haste could have naught to do with the Elton case.

He had heard enough to fully satisfy all doubts on that point, by stealing within earshot of the fellows when they went into camp for an early meal. Not a bit of it! Even the devil Showy Joe called Lute Larrimer, couldn't possibly have suspected his eavesdropping!

Roxy Ringgold seemed inclined to neutrality, but Hoover took the exact opposite. The Lad of Luck had not turned up at that precise juncture without a serious purpose. He was not asking after Adam Elton for naught. And if they knew the cursed devil one-half as well as he, Showy Joe Hoover, knew him, they'd take nothing for granted until they had to.

The cabin was closed, though a brisk little fire blazed and crackled on the wide hearth, for the nights were cool enough to make a bit of artificial heat quite agreeable, even to full-blooded people.

The curtains were closely drawn over the windows, and Showy Joe would have dropped the heavy bar across the front door, only for Huck Shaw, who showed his teeth in half-defiance, half-derision.

The discussion was beginning to grow decidedly warm, when there came an interruption so unexpected, so odd and startling that it fairly dazed the infamous trio.

A wild, nondescript cry—as much the yell of a wild beast as the shout of a human being—came from the upper regions, followed by a furious scrambling noise in the wide-throated chimney.

But before the startled schemers could fairly comprehend even so much of the truth, a heavy mass fell into the fire, scattering the glowing brands, kicking up a cloud of hot ashes as it assumed the shape and semblance of—surely Huck Shaw was right when he yelled, in terror:

"The devil! It's the devil come to fetch us pore critters!"

Headlong Lemuel Claybank shot down the chimney, his outstretched hands saving his neck when the heavy shock came, yelling wildly, seemingly furnished with a dozen legs, each one of which tried to outkick all its mates. And through the veil of smoke and sparks and ashes, his big eyes shone, his wide mouth yawned, his face took on a score or more of different expressions, the mildest of all being quite enough to scare a body of ordinary nerve into convulsions.

Huck Shaw made a break for the front door as he howled forth the words placed on record. Showy Joe Hoover tumbled over his own chair, while Roxy Ringgold—proving herself so much a woman—leaped on top of the stout table, gathering skirts tightly around her legs, giving one shrill scream.

But she was the first to rally from that surprise, and recognizing a human being in that tattered shape, as Lemuel rolled out of the fire to the hearth, she cried aloud, fiercely:

"Kill him! It's a spy, you fools! Kill him, or—"

The front door swung violently inward, causing Huck Shaw to stagger and nearly fall as it struck him in the act of turning in response to Roxy's savage cry.

"What's the matter with playing ye don't, my hearties?" cried a clear, mocking voice, as Light-heart Lute, the Lad of Luck, sprung across the threshold, striking two blows in swift succession, each one of which sent a stout knave reeling to the floor.

"Kill the dev—" Roxy Ringgold was in the act of repeating, when that bold rush paralyzed her tongue for the moment.

"Come off your perch, Roxy!" cried Light-heart Lute, gripping the table and upsetting both it and its burden squarely across the two rascals who had fallen before his blows, but who were now struggling to regain their feet. "You're a fallen angel now, if you weren't before!"

"Fo' de good Lawd, boss!" poor Lemuel was sputtering, when Light-heart Lute gripped his bony neck and sent him flying through the open door, following after and jerking the barrier to behind him.

"Run, ye imp!" the Lucky Lad cried, sternly, giving Lem another impulse that sent him a dozen feet in advance. "You've spoilt my pudding, now see if you can't save your own bacon!"

Taken so completely by surprise from all quarters, Roxy Ringgold could do little more than seek to save her face, if not her bones, from that fall.

She fell across her two companions in evil, and then Light-heart Lute completed his fantastic pyramid by pitching the table, legs upward, on top of them all.

Of course there ensued a mad scramble, in which limbs seemed wonderfully tangled and owners mixed up, while tongues spat curses and venom at random.

Roxy writhed her way from under the table, just a little too late to catch a parting glimpse of their unceremonious visitors; but she heard the front door bang shut, and that was sufficient to lend her fierce passions and quick wit direction.

"Up, ye devils!" she screamed, plucking from her bosom the dagger with which she had that day menaced Showy Joe Hoover. "Up, and kill! Up, and follow—kill! Ye've got to, or the jig's up with us all!"

She tore the door open, and springing across the threshold, glared viciously about in search of the audacious enemy.

"There—that way!" she cried, pointing toward the spot where she had—in truth or in fancy—caught a glimpse of the fugitives. "Chase and—kill, ye devils!"

By this time the two men had rallied sufficiently to get outside the cabin, and catching her savage ardor, Huck Shaw growled to his mate:

"Got to, Joe! It's clean work or a plum' fizzle—ye mind?"

"There—that way, ye sluggards!" fiercely panted the woman, seeming fairly beside herself with impotent fury. "Oh! if I'd only had a gun! I could have dropped 'em both, while—On, ye devils, I say! Chase and kill—kill—kill!"

The two ruffians darted off through the darkness, Roxy Ringgold keeping pace with them for a short distance, only falling out then because she fell in—a ditch, through catching her foot in a creeper.

Past the point indicated by Roxy Ringgold the two knaves dashed, pistols in hand, ready for a flying shot the instant they should sight the enemy; but nothing could be seen of either Light-heart Lute or the negro who had intro-

duced himself to their attention after such a novel fashion.

"We've got to ketch 'em—jest got to!" snarled Huck Shaw.

"They've dodged—you go that way, I'll take this!" as hurriedly panted Showy Joe Hoover, veering a little to the right without waiting for argument or amendment.

With the stars alone to shed light upon the earth, and with the broken ground multiplying the shadows in every direction, it was a very simple matter for the two men to become lost to each other almost instantly. Then what was to insure the one against mistaking the other for one of the fugitives?

Possibly it was some such reflection as this that caused Showy Joe Hoover to abruptly pause, crouching low behind a gray boulder, keeping his ears on the strain until he could no longer catch the sound of Huck Shaw's heavy footfalls. And it may have been for this same reason that, a few moments later, the gambler was gliding as rapidly as the gloom and a feeling that silence would be a very good ally, just then, along a course which promised to carry him past the Elton cabin, and to that part of the cliff in which the little cave was situated.

In that same den, still bound beyond the possibility of escape unaided, Grace Elton was passing the long, weary hours in thoughts gloomy and bitter enough to have turned a brain less clear and evenly balanced.

For the most part her thoughts were on her missing parent, but at times she recalled the words whispered through the darkness by Showy Joe Hoover. Would he come again? Had that scheme been abandoned, or—could it be possible that he meant to betray his associates, not her?

She was thinking of this at the very instant when the gambler gained the curtained entrance, and she was hardly surprised when his voice reached her ears through the darkness:

"Not a word, Miss Elton, if you would not foil our last hope of escape from worse than death!" he panted, creeping to her side in the utter darkness, and using a knife to set her limbs at liberty. "I'm offering my very life to save you—don't bring the blood of a poor, misguided devil upon your head by betraying him to those demons!"

"You mean to set me free—without conditions?"

"I'll guide you to your father, and only ask that you trust me—that you tell him the simple truth—how I risked death in a thousand forms rather than stand idly by and see you tortured like—I can't say the word, dear Grace!" breaking off with a shivering sob.

"Is the way clear, then?"

"If you don't delay me—yes!" as he grasped a hand to guide her out of the dungeon. "I kicked up a racket—never mind how—we must get away from here!" in tones that betrayed genuine agitation, this time. "If we're suspected—if we're caught, salt won't save me! And you—come! I swear that I'm leading you away from worse than a score of ordinary deaths!"

"I'll follow—move faster!" muttered the maiden, seeming to catch some of his excitement. "Once out of this miserable hole—Oh, thank heaven for this!" giving a little gasp of intense relief, as the mass of vines gave way and permitted her to catch a fair view of the star-studded vault above them.

"Not a word—not a sound, for your life!" hissed Showy Joe, his grip tightening on her wrist, his other hand fast to a revolver-butt as he cast an uneasy look toward the cabin. "Quick! if they sight us now, we're gone up!"

Grace Elton offered no resistance, seemingly to be full as anxious as he to leave those perils well behind them; and as rapidly as the difficult nature of the ground would admit, they pressed on through the night.

Only when fairly out of sight of the cave, did her guide seem to breathe freely, and at the same time to remember that the maiden was taking his wonderful sacrifice entirely too much for granted.

"If you only knew—but no!" with a passionate outflinging of his free hand. "Why should I tell you all I've gone through, since making up my mind to rescue you from those vile clutches, or give my own life as a poor atonement for having been duped so long? What do you care for all that? I'm naught to you—I'm worse than the dirt beneath your feet!"

"Not that, only—is this the time for idle talk?"

With a heavy sigh, like one crushed by the weight of hopeless misery, Hoover led the way for a time in silence, then paused close to where two horses were tethered.

"I stole them, for you, Miss Elton," he said, with a hollow laugh, pointing out the animals. "A horse-thief! Yet—'twas my mad, insane, hopeless adoration for you, my angel!"

"Stop, sir!" cried Grace, shaking off the hand that would have drawn her nearer. "If you are really my friend, if you are really honest in your protestations, prove it now, before we take another step! Give me one of the revolvers you are carrying, or I'll go no further with you!"

"What—what do you mean?" a touch of anger in his tone.

"That I'll go no further in your company, without the means of defending myself should you dare—"

"You cursed fool! I'll take you in spite of—"

But before his fierce grip could fairly close upon Grace, a heavy blow crashed against his skull, bringing him to the ground in a heap!

CHAPTER XIV.

TAKING HER OWN PRESCRIPTION.

ALTHOUGH fiercely angry with Lemuel Claybank for ruining his growing hopes of getting at the very heart of the Elton mystery, Light-heart Lute could do no less than to chip in to save the negro from paying the penalty due his disobedience of orders. And, having snatched him "out of the fire" in a double sense, the Lad of Luck fully intended to keep the negro under his own guardianship, at least until the hue and cry which was sure to ensue, had died away.

For a time he did this, urging Lemuel on to speedy flight across the rough ground, knowing that they would be at some disadvantage through the superior acquaintance of their enemies with that immediate section. But then, thanks to the thick-lying obstacles to speedy flight which met them at every stride, and the necessity of swift dodging and abrupt turns, the twain became separated.

Listening to the angry shouts of the enemy, in their rear, Light-heart Lute did not immediately notice this division, and when he did, pausing to peer through the darkness, deceived by first one and then another of the many shadows cast by the rugged rocks, he lost a few more precious moments by guardedly calling to them—not to Lemuel!

"All right!" was his final conclusion, scowling as he caught the sounds of Huck Shaw coming in chase. "A fool for luck, they say, and if that nigger hasn't proved his right to claim that protection this night, then I don't want a cent!"

Calling aloud to Lem, would only give the enemy a double guide if the colored lad should hear his summons. And, though he felt fully able to hold his own with either or both of the two rascals whom he had seen at the cabin, Light-heart Lute had no wish to come to blows, just then.

"It'd be kill or get killed!" he muttered, resuming his flight. "And it's information, not gore, I'm thirsting for just now!"

Still, the Lucky Lad did not entirely drop the idea of saving Lem from the punishment he certainly had done his level best to deserve, and while taking good care to cover his own person, he still made noise enough while fleeing, to keep Huck Shaw fairly close to his track.

For fully half an hour, Light-heart pursued these tactics, and making sure that he had not shaken his pursuer off, as yet, he abruptly changed his manner of flight, turning sharply aside from the line he had been following, moving through the gloom with perfect silence, laughing in his sleeve as he heard that human bull-dog go blundering past, cursing and growling, athirst for gore!

"Holler if you get lost, my covey!" muttered the Lad of Luck, once more changing his course, this time heading almost direct for the lone cabin. "Sorry to shake ye, but—ladies first, always!"

As hinted, Light-heart Lute had managed to gain a point from whence he could both hear and watch the trio of schemers as they held their consultation, and though the unfortunate interruption caused by Lem had cut that eaves-dropping short all too soon, he had heard enough to prove his first suspicions correct: Grace Elton was a captive, and held in confinement at no distant spot.

Just information enough to make him hungry for more. And Light-heart Lute mentally vowed to learn the rest before the rising of another sun!

"I don't reckon Roxy joined the hunt," he mused, while making his way back to the lone cabin. "She wouldn't, if the little girl is held a prisoner under that roof—for sure! Her

head's too long to run it into a possible snare, like that! So—good as old wheat!"

He caught sight of the cabin, and by the light which streamed out through the open door, he saw Roxy Ringgold in front of the building.

"I want you, Roxy—want you bad!" the adventurer muttered, moving rapidly forward, yet taking care not to expose himself unnecessarily.

When the Lucky Lad wanted anything particularly bad, he generally got it, by hook or by crook, and he was resolved that this should not prove an exception.

Still, he knew enough of Roxy Ringgold, by reputation, not to take success for granted simply because he had one of the weaker sex to cope with. He knew that she was more dangerous than many a stout man, and that she would not hesitate to strike or shoot should he afford her the slightest opening for so doing.

Fortunately he needed to alter his line only a few yards, when he had the corner of the cabin as a cover to his advance; and without a sound to betray his coming, the Lad of Luck quickly reached the end of the stone building.

Peering around it, he caught a glimpse of a dress just vanishing across the threshold, and fearing to lose more time in listening for other enemies, lest Roxy close and bar the door, he glided forward and leaped upon the woman from behind.

Taken by surprise, Roxy Ringgold was tripped up. Light-heart Lute smothering her cry of angry fright as they fell together. Then, with more haste than modesty, Larrimer muffled her head in her own skirts, thus effectually disabling both arms and her tongue for the time being.

As neither blow nor shot had greeted him while doing this, Light-heart felt pretty well assured that neither of the men were at the cabin, and he took time to make his capture sure by knotting a stout thong around that handy muffler.

This done, paying no attention to the smothered cries and curses which came from his captive, leaving her to roll and kick as savagely as her humor dictated, the Lucky Lad made a hasty but thorough search of both chamber and kitchen. Vainly. Grace Elton was not to be found about the place, and convinced that further delay would endanger both his life and the retention of his captive, Light-heart Luke gave over.

None too soon, as it proved, for Roxy Ringgold had managed to draw that dagger from her bosom, slitting open the skirts with which her head was muffled, and then sawing away at the thong itself.

"Play ye don't, Roxy, dear!" mocked Larrimer, as he deftly avoided the venomous thrust which the desperate woman aimed at his breast, at the same time catching her wrist and wresting the weapon from her grasp. "I know it's only a love-pat, but I'm too busy to waste time in such soft nonsense!"

"You devil! I'll—Joe—help, for—"

"Joe'd sooner face the real devil, Roxy," laughed Larrimer, as he deftly crammed a portion of the severed cloth into her mouth. "When I really want to interview the dear fellow, be sure I'll know how to find him. Until then—leave a silent kiss for your lover, dear! I must take you on a weenty bit of a jaunt, don't you know?"

It looked like a case of overloading, but Light-heart was a marvel of elastic muscle, and with Roxy Ringgold in his arms, he left the lone cabin, striking into the rocky tract, seemingly not noticing her desperate kicking and writhings to win free.

Pausing once or twice to rest, and to shift his grasp on that uneasy burden, Light-heart Lute was not many minutes in gaining the point which he had in mind; a mass of rocks where, in case of need, he could readily "stand off" a dozen men, each and every one to the full as ugly customers as either Huck Shaw or Showy Joe Hoover.

Once here, he set about making the prisoner a bit more comfortable, yet giving no chances away. She was far too precious—viewed as a hostage—for him to take any unnecessary risks.

"I'm going to remove that gag, my dear madam," he said, in cold, even tones. "But I want to give you a word of warning, first."

"I know who and what you are. I know what dastardly crimes you, in company with your mates, have committed of late. And—though I never to date laid a rude finger on one of your sex—I'll kill you rather than let you go free, without first getting my full price!"

He removed the gag, but kept it in sight, at the same time shaping the cloth into a still more effectual form.

Half-suffocated, the woman gasped forth a vicious curse, but only to have the mass of cloth clapped over her lips again.

"Curse all you like, Roxy, but beware of how you lift your sweet voice! Showy Joe might hear it, and come to learn what his honey wished. Then—I'd wipe out all debts, both old and new, and you'd stand in sore need of a supply of widow's weeds!"

Light though his tone, there was something in those coldly blazing eyes as they looked down into hers, that awed the woman. She knew that this man would surely make his threat good if the occasion arose.

"Don't—I'll not—mercy!" gasped Roxy, in smothered tones.

"You've earned it, haven't you?" mocked the Lucky Lad, but at the same time removing his hand and leaving her lips free. "But I never try to drive too tough a bargain with a customer. And, Madam Ringgold, you're owner of something for which I have an ardent longing. Reckon we can come to a trade?"

"I don't understand you!" muttered the captive, sulkily.

"You'll be wiser before the end is reached, my dear."

"What do you mean by this shameful outrage? How dare you insult a lady without—"

"Meaning yourself, Roxy Ringgold?" curtly interposed Larrimer, his lips curling, a look of scorn leaping into his eyes. "Shall I go over your past record, to show how much you are entitled to call yourself a lady? Shall I begin at this end and run back? Shall I start with Adam Elton—"

"What do I know of that old fool? If he's skipped the—"

"You know that he was to be put out of the way. You know that he was shot and buried. But you don't know that—well, we'll keep that little point in reserve for the present."

"What—what do you mean, you devil?" hoarsely panted Roxy.

"Well, I mean so many things that you'd hardly recover if I was to fling 'em at you all in a bundle. So—for one thing, I mean to cheat Huck Shaw and Showy Joe Hoover most abominably! How, do you ask? By trading you to them in even exchange for a true lady!"

He laughed softly as he noted the start she gave. He could read her thoughts almost as readily as though they had been printed in bold letters upon her brow.

"You hope I'll try it on, so your rascally associates may have a chance to stick or shoot me from behind your skirts? Is that it, Roxy?"

"I don't—you're all wrong, sir," her tones softening, her face taking on a meek, injured, reproachful expression. "I've done no wrong, beyond playing a little part, this afternoon, when you called. I thought you wanted to drive us from our poor home. I believed that evil old man had sold his place to you, as well, and—"

"Oh, Roxy!" drawlingly interjected Larrimer.

"You make me tired!"

"I swear to you, sir, that I'm—"

"A wild and woolly liar, from the ground up? If not that ought to be the ending you had in view. Can't you see that I know you, Roxy Ringgold? Can't you make up your mind to meet me as yourself, not as something you are not, never was, never can be: a woman!"

"You, Showy Joe and Huck Shaw are playing for the bonanza Adam Elton owned, be that real or imaginary. To gain it, you three plotted his death. Between you, he was shot down, and buried!"

"No! no!"

"I said it, and I have the proof. I found the poor fellow, and helped him out of his living tomb—Does that bite, Roxy? It ought, but I'm giving it to you straight as a string! Adam Elton was alive when buried, and alive when I chanced upon his grave. I helped him out, and he told me all about his bonanza, his daughter, his enemies and his fears. I swore to do what he was too weak to attempt, and I'm here to keep that vow. Now—where have you hidden Grace Elton?"

"It's a lie! She went with him—her father!" panted the woman.

"It is a lie, but *your* lips shaped it, Roxy Ringgold," was the cold, stern retort. "You refuse to accept the one chance that I can offer you? You still refuse to tell me what I ask?"

"I can't tell you what I don't know—can I, you devil?"

"You can pay the penalty due your crimes,

at any rate. I hate to think of fitting a noose about the throat of one built like a woman, but—unless you confess in full, Roxy Ringgold, I swear to hang you like a sheep-killing cur, between your two partners in sin!"

CHAPTER XV.

"WHEN ROGUES FALL OUT."

SHOWY JOE HOOVER fell like a log beneath that blow, so deftly delivered that he never caught a glimpse of his assailant. Not a sound had come to his ears in warning, and never was a knave caught more completely off his guard.

How long he lay unconscious, he could only surmise by the relative position of the twinkling stars overhead; and during those first minutes of painful restoration, the gambler had no room for calculations.

His head seemed spinning 'round like a drunken top, at the same time throbbing as though a particularly impatient imp was imprisoned within his skull, out of which he was doing his best to burst.

His first thought was of Grace Elton, and he stared dizzily around in quest of her, again and again staring stupidly at the point where he remembered having left the two horses hitched. They were gone, but even after fully realizing so much, the dazed gambler could not realize that other equally evident fact: that Grace Elton was gone, too!

Little by little the truth sifted through his tangled up wits, and for a brief space Showy Joe cowered by the side of the bushes, hand on pistol as he glared about him, expecting to see each dim shadow suddenly turn into that dreaded enemy—Light-heart Lute, the Lucky Lad!

But his rallying wits were working with greater accuracy as he recovered from the shock of the stroke that had laid him low, and measuring Larrimer in his own bushel, he grew pretty well convinced that another hand than his must have dealt that blow, and robbed him of his precious prize.

"He'd have butchered me, double-times over! He'd never leave me a chance to come back at him! Then—who did it?"

With his fears lessened greatly by this reasoning, Hoover groped about the spot in quest of some signs by which he might solve the mystery, but with poor success. All he could swear to, was the vanishment of both maiden and horses.

"If I knew! If I could only guess!" he groaned, mechanically turning toward the lone cabin. "If those two fools had only backed me up, as honest pardns should, why—By Satan!"

It seemed the work of magic to Hoover, but in that instant he believed he saw the entire truth, which had puzzled him so thoroughly.

"I'll kill him! I'll kill 'em both if they've tried to play me dirt!" he viciously snarled, hastening toward the cabin, hand on pistol.

A treacherous cur himself, it was not difficult for him to picture Huck Shaw playing much the same game, and in those first moments of savage rage, Hoover was positive the human bull-dog had followed and tricked him out of the golden prize.

Still, his rage was not blind enough to make him forget all caution, and as he came within sight of the cabin, Hoover slackened his pace, crouching low and looking for possible traps.

Not for long. He caught sight of a human figure nearing the hut, and heard the familiar voice of Huck Shaw calling aloud to Roxy.

"She's in it, too, eh?" snarled the half-crazed gambler, advancing swiftly, holding his drawn revolver close along one thigh, hidden in the gloom, but ready for instant use.

"Who's thar?" harshly challenged Shaw as he caught sight of that moving figure. "Yelp out lively, or I'll bore ye, too—"

"It's me, pardner—don't shoot!" interposed the gambler, choking back his venomous hatred for the moment. "Where's Roxy?"

"You tell! She can't be in yender, or she'd show up when I called out. Reckon—she didn't join the chase, Joe?"

"Isn't she with the girl? Didn't you leave them both together?"

"Didn't I—why, ye dug-gun fool!" in sudden heat. "Didn't I go chasin' them cussed critters? An' hain't I jest got back? An' didn't you—whar's the gal an' Roxy, Joe Hoover?"

"That's it, Huck Shaw—where are they? Out with it, ye dirty cheat! It's my face that's toward ye now, not my back! Where are they?"

"Stiddy, critter!" growled Shaw, too utterly puzzled to at once take in the enormity of those epithets and insinuations. "Ef the gal's gone, it's you an' Roxy playin' me dirt, an'—What've

ye done with her, ye creepin' sneak on two laigs?"

"You lie, Huck Shaw, if you dare hint—" "Chaw it! Swaller it back, ye cur!" savagely growled Shaw, jerking forth a pistol as he spoke the words.

But Showy Joe Hoover was already prepared, as we have seen, and his weapon was the first to speak, even as he squatted and sprung nimbly to one side, the more surely to foil his adversary's shot.

Chance guided his lead, for it struck and shattered Shaw's right hand, knocking the revolver from his grasp, wringing a howl of savage rage and pain from his lips.

"Ye devil! I'll drink yer blood fer—" he roared, stooping to snatch up the weapon with his left hand, but falling forward on his face as Hoover fired two more shots in swift succession.

"Say you will, eh?" snarled the gambler, as he saw his antagonist fall, seemingly shot through and through by both bullets. "Play double on a man and your master, will you? Try to—" giving a startled curse as a glare of light lit up that prostrate heap, and a bullet whizzed close to his face.

Huck Shaw was not dead, though he might be crippled, and realizing as much, Hoover shrunk back, lifting his pistol for a finishing shot.

Before he could perfect his aim, Shaw fired again, and a yelp of pain burst from Hoover's lips as the pistol fell from his benumbed fingers.

Without attempting to regain his weapon, showing far less pluck than the lesser ruffian, Showy Joe turned and took to his heels, too badly demoralized to make an effort to find out how badly he was hurt.

He was able to dodge nimbly from side to side as Huck Shaw sent bullet after bullet in chase, and just then his sole thought was of carrying his precious carcass out of range as speedily as possible.

He had forgotten all about Light-heart Lute and his possible allies, for the time being, and it was only when he caught sight of a man running to cut his line of flight—only when he heard a clear, stern voice hailing him, that he remembered.

"Halt, Showy Joe!" cried Light-heart Lute, recognizing the slender figure of the fleeing gambler. "Halt, or I'll down ye for keeps!"

Instead, Hoover wheeled abruptly to the left, too blind with fear to see what lay before him!

"Look out, ye fool!" cried Larimer, in hasty warning. "Halt! or you'll fall!"

He left the sentence incomplete, for words were useless. Realizing his peril only in time to give vent to a despairing screech, Showy Joe Hoover plunged over the nearly perpendicular wall of rocks, down to the bed of Little Roarer, full fifty feet below!

Light-heart Lute ran swiftly to the spot, but he could see nothing of the gambler. He called to him, but Showy Joe Hoover made no reply.

"He never knew what hurt him!" shivering a bit as he turned away, after a final look. "I didn't mean just *that* sort of ending. It's too mighty good for such a dastardly cur!"

Having noted the spot from whence those shots came in chase of the doomed gambler, Light-heart Lute, his own pistol in readiness, picked his steps that way, quickly distinguishing the motionless body of a man.

"Is that you, Lem?" he called out, yet standing on his guard.

No answer came, and seeing nothing to alarm him further, Light-heart Lute drew closer, giving a breath of relief as he recognized Shaw, not Claybank, as he had at first feared would prove the case.

It took but a few moments to assure him that Huck Shaw was still living, though badly hurt; and knowing that this accounted for the entire outfit, he did not hesitate about dragging the wounded rascal across to the cabin, where he could examine him more thoroughly by the aid of a light.

"You've got your last dose, old fellow," he said, as Shaw opened his eyes with a faint groan. "Clear off your score as well as you may, and tell me where to find Grace Elton, as a starter?"

"I—durn ye, Joe—I'll down ye fer—"

It was clear that Shaw neither recognized him nor comprehended that question. A spasmodic struggle accompanied that broken speech, then the wounded wretch seemed to fall into a sort of stupor.

Light-heart Lute frowned darkly, his hands clinching as though they itched to close upon that hairy throat and shake the whole truth out of the knave, even though life came away with the information. But that temptation was quickly put aside, and disarming the fellow, he

passed out of the cabin, closing the door behind him, after which Light-heart ran at top speed to the spot where he had left Roxy Ringgold in bonds.

He had been drawn from her side by the sound of firing near the Elton cabin, and naturally fearing that Lem Claybank was in sore trouble, had made hot speed to the scene of combat.

"You're wanted, Roxy," he said, cutting the bonds from her legs. "It's a case of dog eat dog, and your husband is at the cabin, *dyin'!*"

"Dying? My husband? Oh—let me go to him! My love—my life!" panted the woman, terribly shaken by the news, so bluntly broken.

CHAPTER XVI.

BETTER THAN "GOOD ENOUGH!"

AFTER all, it proved a lucky mistake Light-heart Lute made, acting on the parts played by Roxy Ringgold and Huck Shaw the day before.

It was her one weak point, Roxy's intense love for Showy Joe Hoover; and the statement that he was lying at the point of death in the Elton cabin, completely unnerved her, and before she could rally her wits, Light-heart Lute had a fresh stroke in readiness.

His main point was to learn where Grace Elton was hidden, and until her safety was fully assured, he had no room for pity for these convicted criminals.

When Roxy betrayed her intense relief and joy at finding Huck Shaw instead of Showy Joe, Light-heart Lute pitilessly described how the gambler had rushed blindly to his doom.

Then the woman really broke down, and a full confession was not difficult to extort from her lips.

With high hopes, leaving Roxy bound, and Shaw barely conscious, the Lad of Luck hastened to the cave, only to meet with disappointment, though he paused long enough to make sure that a prisoner of some description had surely been stowed away in that cheerless den.

Returning, he used his last drops of brandy in bracing up the wounded rascal, making him fully comprehend the utter uselessness of further lying, since his death was only a question of a few hours, at the best.

"Take your choice, Huck Shaw," he said, with merciless distinctness. "Die in peace, or be choked to death like a sheep-killing cur! For, I swear to you by all that's holy! unless you make a clean breast of the entire business, I'll fit a noose about your neck and haul you up to a limb of the tree out yonder!"

"Swear you'll let me—die my own way—I'll tell!" panted the wounded wretch, gazing up into those stern eyes.

"I swear: now do *your* part, or I'll do *mine*! First! what were you and Hoover fighting about?"

Huck Shaw explained, as well as he was able, and by adding what he already knew of Showy Joe and his plans—vaguely outlined during the consultation so abruptly broken up by Lem Claybank—Light-heart Lute gave a shrewd guess as to what had taken place.

Grace Elton was gone, yet all three of those plotting against her were accounted for. Lemuel had vanished, as well. Then—what more likely than that those two had come together?

Leaving that point for the present, Light-heart Lute questioned Shaw concerning Adam Elton, and after securing a repeated pledge that he would not be tortured, the dying criminal confessed that he and Joe Hoover had waylaid the old gentleman, each one shooting him at the same time, then burying his rifled body, as they supposed, forever.

Still other crimes were confessed as the miserable wretch grew weaker and less able to parry the questions his own broken words suggested, and before the end came, Huck Shaw made one particular revelation which was fated to exert a powerful influence over the Lad of Luck in days to come; for it was the first positive clew Luther Larimer had as yet found bearing on the mysterious disappearance of his father, so many long years before.

As the effects of the brandy began to die away, Huck Shaw grew less coherent, finally breaking out into wild curses, threats against his enemies, interspersed with prayers that he be shown mercy—that Light-heart Lute would not hang him for killing Adam Elton.

"Yo' plum' foolish, white man!" just then broke forth a familiar voice from the threshold. "Kayn't hang a man fo' killin' a man what hain't *bin* killed! How yo' kill a man when he hain't dead, eh?"

"Lem!"

"Dat's dess who I is, boss!" chuckled the negro, dancing a double-shuffle on the doorstep, the picture of high glee. "An' de young lady, she done ax me to ax you, boss, ef—"

"What young lady?"

"Miss Grace Elton, sah! Fo' a fac', boss! An' she's back dab, sah, at de hole we walled up, nussin' ob de ole gemman, boss, what—"

"If you're lying, Lem Claybank, I'll skin you alive!" ejaculated Light-heart Lute, unable to believe his own senses.

It was nearly noon when Lemuel Claybank put in his appearance at the cabin, and it was more than an hour later before all misty points were fairly cleared away.

Blind luck led Lem to the right spot, after becoming separated from his boss, and seeing this young lady with one of the conspirators, who was in the act of using force to bring about his wishes, the plucky colored lad called his good right arm into play again, literally "knocking out" the arch-villain.

At first Grace Elton regarded Lem with suspicion, but in the end they reached an amicable understanding, and having drawn from him the account of Adam Elton's finding, Grace insisted on his leading her to the death-cave at once.

Thanks to the horses provided by Showy Joe for quite another purpose, this journey was quickly made, and no sooner had they touched the first of the rocks piled up before the entrance, than a hollow groan came to their ears from within.

Lem wanted to run, but Grace held him under her pistol muzzle, making him work swiftly, for she divined the marvelous truth—her father was living, not dead!

And so it proved. He himself explained, later, how he had fallen into a trance, which Light-heart Lute mistook for death. He could hear all that was said, but could neither move nor speak. And his one consolation was the solemn vow Light-heart Lute made above his body, to rescue and care for the "little girl!"

By the time Lem had finished his story, Huck Shaw had paid the last penalty, dying in a dull stupor, apparently without pain, at the end.

Light-heart Lute prepared a package of food, giving it, together with a loaded revolver, to Roxy Ringgold. He bade her depart, with the somewhat sarcastic hope that she might repent her sins and live a better life from that time henceforward.

Like one in a dream, the sorely broken woman moved away, and so she disappears from these pages.

The corpse was removed from the cabin, and placed for the time being in the little cave where Grace Elton had been confined. Then, fastening the house, and mounting the horses which Lem had brought back with him, the two men hastened on their way to join the Eltons.

It seemed a miracle, but Adam Elton actually did recover from his hurts, and within a few short months became as strong and hearty as ever before.

His gratitude to Light-heart Lute and Lemuel Claybank was very great, but only Lem was willing to accept any actual reward. The colored lad was richly rewarded, and after a time he drifted away, growing tired of life in the mining regions, where he could not "play ball!"

His greatest ambition was never fully gratified, owing to the prejudice against his color, but Lemuel is to-day the "phenomenon" of a strong amateur club, champion of its county; and only the other day the writer had the pleasure of seeing him "do up" a rival club while officiating "in the box!"

And Light-heart Lute?

At first he was a little abashed in the presence of the lady whom he had pictured only as a "little girl," but that feeling soon wore off, and in due course of time there was a wooing and a wedding, in both of which Luther Larimer maintained his reputation as a "Lad of Luck."

THE END.

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